

Richard Gelwick, *Way of Discovery*

Gelwick's book is a fine introduction to Polanyi's deep and wide-ranging thought. As the title suggests, the notion of discovery is at the core of Polanyi's philosophy, which stands in stark contrast to mainstream modern philosophy and the Western tradition, broadly speaking. Even in its more specialized instances, the process of discovery as it occurs in the sciences is often not what science is viewed as promoting. Rather theories, empirical evidence, the process of justifying either these (and so on) tend to be highlighted, where discoveries are by-products of those more fundamental aspects of science. Let us call this the "received view" of science and the scientific process. It is a view where reason and justification are the crucial players, a view also shared by mainstream philosophy of science and western philosophy in general. This received view has its roots in the ancient Greek emphasis on *logos*, transformed through time and still more or less setting the agenda for Western civilization. Here is where Polanyi enters the picture: his philosophical framework provides a breath of fresh air, offering some relief from the regime of reason and her many children. It isn't that his philosophy is anti-rational, of course; it is rather a subtle undermining of reason's dominant role by focusing on the enabling conditions through which reason can rule, showing instead a contextualizing background where discovery, creativity, and fallibility and commitment are the fundamental players that have always been present and make reason possible in the first place. Focusing on such a background generates a quite radically new philosophical framework, and perhaps for that reason may provide an impetus for taking Polanyi seriously and for further exploration of his wide-ranging thought.

Keeping in mind the above, here are chapter by chapter highlights of Gelwick's work.

Introduction

There are a series of crises that Western culture is facing and will face, based on tacitly held but highly questionable assumptions [the roots of the 2008 economic crash come to mind]. These crises occur at various scales of resolution, whether crises in individual or cultural beliefs, systemic practices at various levels, and so forth. These crises call for some sort of vision that is humane, and in which one can invest hope. Such hope, if it is to be existentially authentic, as it were, cannot be dogmatic or narrowly hewn to tradition. Rather it needs to be open-ended, fallible, and heuristic. In this way a kind of speculative epistemics grounds any metaphysics, allowing for dynamic orders of being that can fuel and give credence to whatever is hoped for, in humane fashion.

Chapter 1: The Importance of Discovery

Combating these crises finds a particular example stemming from the image of science as objective. The ossification of objectivity as what science is about and ought to be about is a false narrative that 1) doesn't actually capture what real science and scientists do; 2) rides on the back of the very sorts of processes that when carefully examined actually undermine this scientific picture of objectivity; 3) promotes a kind of atomistic individualism that overrides the crucial communal feature of science; and 4) via such isolation falsely justified as correct, further opens the door to forms of violence perpetuated under the aegis of objectivism [an example perhaps is neo-liberal economics, its greed-is-good moral inversion, and its ruthless "objective" promotion of the bottom-line...economics here as scientism more than as science].

The way out is a heuristic philosophy in place of a scientific objectivism. This is Polanyi's way of discovery. This "way" 1) is more in line with the actual practices of science and scientists; 2) undergirds how actual discoveries are made and offers a philosophically sensitive account of these tacit practices; 3) recognizes the powers of the individual in synergetic connection with communities of explorers committed to the same ideas and ideals; and 4) is fallibilistic and thus more attuned to various moral inversions that perpetuate forms of violence [e.g. that business-as-usual approaches, such as triple-bottom-line, are the only viable models for battling climate change—and green-washing is good!].

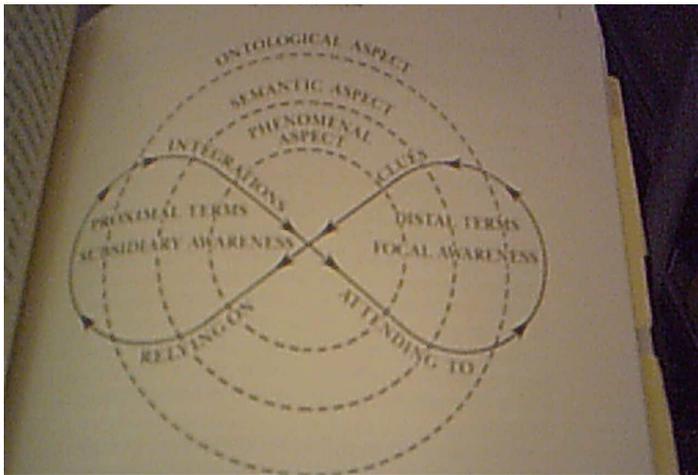
Chapter 2: From Scientist to Philosopher

How did Polanyi come to his novel and radical framework? It stems from his reflections on knowing in the sciences, the process of discovery, and how these didn't quite square with various mainstream accounts of both knowing and scientific knowledge. In brief, this chapter outlines the moves from 1) the way of discovery as a heuristic philosophy, in which the inexact is actually the "standard" situation, in contrast to the manifest image of scientific knowing and knowledge; to 2) discovery, properly understood, as the key

notion and activity of science and scientists; and to 3) a philosophical realization that his account of tacit knowing is actually an account of all forms of knowing (Polanyi's bold claim that *all* knowing is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowing). [For philosophers trained in the analytic tradition, this is a massive upending of knowledge and how knowing works or ought to work. But if one patiently expands outward in seeing how Polanyi develops and applies this notion, and in reflecting on various forms of knowing—human as well as non-human—this seeming knock on Polanyi actually becomes the great strength of his approach.]

Chapter 3: A New Paradigm

So what is this tacit knowing? There are four features or aspects: the focal aspect, the subsidiary aspect, the from-to or meaning aspect, and the ontological aspect. The first three are primary, the last one is parasitic on the first three. Gelwick has a nice diagram illustrating these aspects and their inextricable entanglement in actual lived experience. Here's the diagram:



A concrete example can help here. Let's use Polanyi's example of a blind man learning to use a cane. The phenomenal aspect is the focal dimension of the cane, or what he is probing when tapping the cane in front of him. That overall intentional complex—its overall "qualia" as it were—is the phenomenal aspect of using the cane. The semantic aspect concerns the bodily affordances that support this focal attention (the hands, limbs, brain, etc. as they bear on the cane's directed movements); these subsidiary actions, moving from the body to the cane's focal probings, constitute the meaning of the cane as that cane bears on what it is doing. The ontological aspect is the overall evaluation of what the cane reveals—turn left at this marker, or steps ahead! These aspects are intertwined with one another in a reticulated and reticulating loop (the "infinity" loop in the diagram), forming an overall account of how any knowing of any sort works.

Chapter 4: A Heuristic Philosophy

If this is a heuristic philosophy placing emphasis on the process of discovery and its centrality in all our modes of being—especially those geared towards knowing—what are some of its features neglected by much of Western philosophy? There are a number of features, but three in particular are worth mentioning here: 1) imagination is more primordial and important than "reason/*logos*"; 2) intuition is the integrative process underlying knowing as a skillful mode of being; and 3) the indeterminateness of nature is fallibly explored via thrusts and sallies of the imagination and intuitive guesses. All *personal* knowing has these features, which come with a kind of responsibility towards that which is known. A nice feature of Polanyi's philosophy is a comprehensive approach to knowing in all its guises—scientific, artistic, religious, poetic, etc. This is not a problems-based approach that narrowly explores and isolates topics of inquiry, perhaps missing the trees for the forest—and often based on tacit scientific modes of proceeding, an often noted physics-envy. Combatting scientific Objectivism paves the way for his heuristic philosophy.

Chapter 5: Invitation to Explorers

What sort of heuristic philosophy is this? As alluded to above, it takes seriously a continuum of experience, whether scientific, artistic, religious, or otherwise. All experiences of a skillful sort are grounded or centered by explorers who are called upon to pursue truth with universal intent. In particular, as explorers who are held responsible to this larger sort of calling, our moral and intellectual passions are to be conscripted in service of this larger pursuit. We become, as Gelwick writes, the “instruments of exploration in the universe. The acceptance of this responsibility is our most important choice” (WD p.136). This chapter discusses some of the facets of the manifold of experience, and how Polanyi’s vision differs starkly from a number of mainstream positions.

Chapter 6: The Transformation of Imagination

If we become members of Polanyi’s society of explorers, investigating the open-ended continuum of experience, what does the universe look like from a Polanyian point of view? Nature is no longer an object, it becomes our home, and as participants we indwell in its richness. We are part of a larger whole still in the process of unfolding; we are active centers shaping and coming to co-define elements of this larger whole. And as we cannot know without first believing, consequently “there is a growth and transformation of our beliefs and also of our knowledge” (p.157). Acts of faith bridge the gap between belief and knowing, which are grounded by commitment to pursuing truth and its attendant responsibilities. It is through Polanyi’s comprehensive philosophy, with tacit knowing at its core, that if practiced we can find that we are once again at home in the universe.