

Renaturing
Experience:
Michael Polanyi's
The Study of Man

3 June 2022
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“The problem which this lecture has set itself can ... be [formulated] by asking: Is the ideal of responsible choice impracticable in the same sense as a perpetual mobile is? Does the nature of man as a material system, as a machine, as a centre of appetites, and as a part of society subject to coercion by predominant interests, permit him to make any truly independent choices? ... Here we have before us that systematic denaturing of human experience by modern empiricism which I denounced in my first lecture—and now is the moment to show, as I had promised, that the true nature of things can be reinstated by accrediting our capacity to establish knowledge by an *act* of understanding” (emphasis added).

— Polanyi, *Study of Man* (63-64)

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- Central problems and issues in SM and related writings
 - The relationship or correspondence between different areas of intellectual inquiry
 - Development of the epistemology described in *Personal Knowledge* (further refined in *Tacit Dimension*)
 - The possibility of subjectively apprehending objective truth (leveraging contingency)
 - The nature and scope of human responsibility (“calling,” both individual and collective)
 - The nature and purpose of education in late modern society (tradition, culture, freedom, etc.)
 - The renewal and rejuvenation of Western culture
 1. Avoiding the self-destruction of unbridled moral passions
 2. Avoiding the self-destruction of atomic/nuclear conflagration

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- "The Two Cultures" (1959)
 - The problem: the claims of science are not too little but too great (40)
 - The challenge: "to achieve harmony and truth over the whole range of knowledge" (41)
 - The "nonsensical" character of reductionist empiricism revealed in the twentieth century (42)
 - The late modern "disregard of truth in favour of hard-boiled scientific ideals" a pervasive problem (43)
 - The "fusion" of "*moral scepticism*" and "*moral indignation*" produces modern nihilism (44; cf. BN)
 - Reconciling "revolutionary" and "traditional" powers in a world armed with atomic weapons (44)
 - Modern nihilism begat a "new primitive culture" that "cleared the ground" (44-45; cf. MN on "visionary art")
 - Signs of hope in the "decline of social zeal," a turning away from nihilistic impulses (45)
 - Continued progress requires emancipating the modern mind from the "absurdities" of reductionism (46)

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- “Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?” (1963)
 - The problem: the strict separation of domains of knowledge (4)
 - The solution: recognizing both the common structure of all knowing and humanity's calling
 - Starting point: “*there are things that we know but cannot tell*” (4-5)
 - The “from-to” apprehension of wholes and parts, the execution of skills, visual perception (5-7)
 - Embodiment as paradigmatic for all forms of indwelling and interiorization (7)
 - Concepts, theories, language as symbolic forms of indwelling (8)
 - The self-stultifying “absurdities” of reductionist empiricism (9-10)
 - Comprehensive entities organized by operational principles subject to boundary conditions (10)
 - Restoring the mutual cooperation of presumptively conflicted domains of knowledge (11)
 - The priority of “common sense” over strict rationalism (11)
 - Life as a “hierarchic sequence of comprehensive levels” (12)
 - Evolution, not as meaningless or blind, but evidently purposeful (12-14)
 - The “cosmic responsibility” of humanity (13)
 - The insufficiency of “values created at [our] own command” (14)
 - Our contingency renders the notion of “absolute self-determination meaningless” (14)
 - Our contingency also affords the opportunity for recognizing and creating meaning

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- *The Study of Man* (1959): Background and Context
 - First Lindsay Memorial Lecture (March, 1958) at the University College of North Staffordshire
 - Arthur Dunlop Lindsay (1879-1952)
 - Scottish-born British moral and political philosopher, educator, and university administrator
 - Educational reforms put into practice at Staffordshire (now University of Keele)
 - Michael promised Karl he would make an “absolutist anti-atom statement” (Scott & Moleski, 232)
 - Lindsay and Polanyi both participated in the BBC series *The Challenge of Our Time* (1938-1950)

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- *The Challenge of Our Time* BBC broadcasts
 - Grace Wyndham Goldie, producer
 - Arthur Koestler (1905-1983) – Jewish Hungarian-born British journalist and author
 - E.L. (Ernest Llewellyn) Woodward (1890-1971) – English historian (Oxford, Princeton)
 - J.D. (John Desmond) Bernal (1901-1971) – Irish biologist (Communist sympathies)
 - E.M. (Edward Morgan) Forster (1879-1970) – English novelist, essayist, librettist
 - Benjamin Farrington (1891-1974) – Irish classicist (socialist sympathies)
 - Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) – Jewish Hungarian-born British chemist and philosopher
 - J.B.S. (John Burdon Sanderson) Haldane (1892-1964) – English biologist (Communist sympathies)
 - V.A. (Vigo Auguste) Demant (1893-1983) – English Anglican priest and theologian
 - C.H. (Conrad Hal) Waddington (1905-1975) – English biologist (Communist sympathies)
 - A.D. (Arthur David) Ritchie (1891-1967) – English chemist and philosopher (at Manchester with Polanyi)
 - A.D. (Arthur Dunlop) Lindsay (1879-1952) – Scottish-born British philosopher and educator
 - Rupert Crawshay-Williams (1908-1977) – British humanist author and critic (T.H. Huxley's great-grandson)

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- *The Challenge of Our Time* (London, UK: Percival Marshall, 1948), edited by G.W. Goldie
 - Grace Wyndham Goldie, "The story behind *The Challenge of Our Times*"
 - Arthur Koestler, "What the modern world is doing to the soul of man"
 - E.L. Woodward, "Has all this happened before?"
 - J.D. Bernal, "The social responsibility of science"
 - E.M. Forster, "The point of view of the creative artist"
 - Benjamin Farrington, "What light from the ancient world?"
 - Michael Polanyi, "Can science bring peace?" [*The Listener*, 25 April 1946]
 - J.B.S. Haldane, "The view of a biologist"
 - V.A. Demant, "The fairy ring of civilization"
 - C.H. Waddington, "Can science be reconciled with the humanities?"
 - A.D. Ritchie, "Summing up: I"
 - A.D. Lindsay, "Summing up: II"
 - Rupert Crawshay-Williams, "Epilogue"

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- *The Study of Man*
 - I: Understanding Ourselves
 - II: The Calling of Man
 - III: Understanding History

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- *Study of Man I: Understanding Ourselves* (11-39)
 - The impossibility of a comprehensive account of human knowledge (11-12)
 - Exposition of tacit (pre-articulate) and explicit (articulate) knowing (12-24)
 - “Understanding” as the operation by which we organize experience and gain control over it (20-28)
 - Seeking a “single continuously variable conception of knowing” across arts and sciences (28)
 - Universal intent and a sense of calling prevent knowing from devolving to subjectivism (27-28)
 - Embodiment, contrivances, and articulation all forms of indwelling (30-31)
 - Perceptive and appetitive drives anticipate our “*craving for understanding*” (34; cf. 56-57)
 - Understanding motivated by intellectual passion and attracted by coherence and beauty (36-39)

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- *Study of Man II: The Calling of Man* (41-70)
 - Exposition of responsibility: pursuing the objective through the subjective (41-43)
 - Higher and lower “levels” of awareness, meaning, and reality (46-55)
 - Higher levels of achievement admit to the possibility of higher forms/degrees of error (58)
 - Human beings have unique capacities, opportunities, responsibilities (59)
 - Participation in one’s “cultural heritage” determines one’s responsibility and calling (60)
 - Reductionistic accounts of cultural achievement represent the “denaturing of ... experience” (64)
 - Recognizing others as having equal dignity means recognizing they share our responsibilities (66)
 - A “supreme trust” has been placed in humanity “by the whole creation” (69)

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- *Study of Man* III: Understanding History (71-99)
 - History as the record of human decisions, especially “political” ones (71-72)
 - Degrees of judgment: empirical, purposeful, deliberative, moral (74-80)
 - The higher the degree of judgment, the greater the need for indwelling and sympathy (76)
 - Understanding “rectifies our being”: being a better person leads to better understanding (82-83)
 - Analysis of error: avoiding rationalism, relativism, and determinism (87-92)
 - Acknowledging the firmament of transcendent “standards ... and values” available to all (90)
 - Apprehending an event different from recognizing an “encounter” (94-95)
 - No greater hazard than the one that attends the decision as to which ideal we pursue (97-98)
 - Knowledge as a “consistent act of understanding and submission,” grasping and being grasped (99)

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- Presenting questions
 - Polanyi is *en route* to a participatory epistemology of mutual indwelling (beyond fideism)
 - The priority of constructive thought over critical thought
 - The modern malaise: the inversion of the constructive and the critical (cf. “moral inversion”)
 - The inadequacy of the political: the priority of the intellectual (“society of explorers”)
 - The inadequacy of history: historical judgments presume a “higher” standard(s)
 - The necessarily transcendent (supernatural) character of our standards of judgment
 1. The implied convertibility and unity of the transcendentals (true, good, beautiful)
 2. Standards of judgment available to all require an account of their origin/ground
 3. Necessary incompleteness of knowledge itself an image of contingent reality
 4. Life as a “creative power that goes beyond that which we can account for in ourselves”
 - The unresolved question of the relationship between mind and body
 - The unresolved question of the relationship between nature and supernature (the priority of eschatology)