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## *Beyond Post-Modernism via Polanyi's Post-Critical Philosophy*

For the last third of the twentieth century on up to the present, we have been increasingly inundated in almost every discipline with intellectual work that identifies itself (or is readily identifiable) as *post-modern*, in opposition to now openly questioned assumptions that have characterized the dominant modern intellectual culture (particularly that associated with the European Enlightenment) for the previous 250 years. What I have in mind when I speak of “post-modern,” though, is not just family resemblances among the contents of this grouping of intellectual work, despite its great diversity. I wish to speak of post-modernism as *an intellectual ethos* that has been challenging and progressively displacing the previous intellectual ethos (that of modernism), an ethos that has to do with presuppositions governing the attitudes, methods, and interpersonal relationships of intellectual reflection, discussion, and exchange.

Virtually the entire body of philosophical work by Michael Polanyi was published prior to the emergence of post-modernism. As much of Polanyi's work was devoted to criticism of some of the most fundamental assumptions at work in modern intellectual culture, it would seem reasonable to locate Polanyi as post-modernist or allied with post-modernism in some sense of the word. However, the bulk of post-modern intellectual work has been decidedly more negatively critical than Polanyi of the pretensions of modern thought to certainty, to universality, and to objectivity (i.e., to a radical transcending of human subjectivity), especially of the divine-like prestige of modern scientific knowledge held up for emulation by all other intellectual endeav-

ors. So where does Polanyi's thought fit into this mix?

The subtitle of Polanyi's *magnum opus*,<sup>1</sup> is "Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy." Polanyi himself actually wrote relatively little on what he meant and understood by the term "post-critical"—though he clearly meant by it the fundamentally different approach to philosophical, and especially epistemological, issues taken in that work.<sup>2</sup> Though others before me have attempted to explain what Polanyi meant by the term "post-critical" and have ventured to locate Polanyi's thought in relation to post-modernism, I don't think that these attempts have grasped the full relevance of Polanyi's thought to the controversies and confusions surrounding post-modernism. Though he did not live long enough to be exposed to and become acquainted with the principal expressions of post-modernism, Polanyi's work properly understood is, I believe, directly addressed to the core issues at stake. I think that Polanyi's coinage of the term "post-critical" is an extraordinarily apt designation of what can move us beyond the dead ends and stalemates of post-modernism. Why I believe this is so will become more evident in what follows.

David Ray Griffin of the Center for Process Studies at Claremont Graduate University invented and introduced a distinction, probably in the late 1970s or early 1980s, between "constructive post-modernism" and "deconstructive post-modernism" that is relevant here.<sup>3</sup> For several years Griffin was general editor of a series of volumes on constructive post-modernism published by SUNY Press. Whereas the most well-known post-modern intellectual work is characterized by deconstructive analyses of modernist ideas, practices, and institutions that do not offer constructive alternative hypotheses and proposals, there are some that do. These Griffin designates "constructive post-modern." He particularly has in mind work that has been influenced by the thought of Alfred North Whitehead as exemplary of this type, though he does not limit it to Whitehead-influenced work. Polanyi's work would clearly fall under this loose category. Nevertheless, in the present essay I will stick to Polanyi's usage of "post-critical." And most of the time I

refer to post-modernism I shall be referring to what Griffin designates “deconstructive post-modernism.”

Polanyi’s endeavor to shift himself and his readers from a critical to a post-critical orientation in epistemology, from a critical to a post-critical intellectual paradigm (he spoke of “intellectual framework” rather than “paradigm”), from a critical to a post-critical intellectual ethos is not easily understood—partly because there is no neutral, common presuppositional framework from which to consider and appreciate both the former and the latter. They are in certain respects (though not in all) incommensurable. A shift from indwelling the one to indwelling the other involves what Polanyi calls an irreversible gestalt shift. This shift is no less great and momentous than the shift from a pre-critical to a critical orientation, and keeping the latter shift in mind is helpful in understanding what it involves.

What Polanyi understood by the critical orientation has less to do with the explicit ideals and beliefs of modernity than with the underlying tacit attitudes and methodology of modernity—that is to say, its intellectual ethos. The latter defines itself in opposition to what modernity has designated and differentiated itself from being, namely, a *pre-critical*, pre-modern orientation. What is meant here by a pre-critical, pre-modern orientation is not necessarily prior in historical times; most importantly, it is construed as developmentally prior and condescendingly so. Looked at in this way, the intellectual ethos of deconstructive post-modernism, from the perspective of a Polanyian analysis, is essentially continuous with that of modernity. Where it differs from modernism is that its critical attitude is now turned upon the ideals, beliefs, and institutions of modernity (including such cherished ideals as truth, beauty, justice, liberty, the inherent dignity of all human beings, fraternity, universal education, and democracy). In effect, deconstructive post-modernism actually amounts to critical modernism turning upon itself. It is the final culmination of the critical project of modernity, what Polanyi called the “self-immolation of the modern mind.”

The critical movement, which seems to be nearing the end of its course today, was

perhaps the most fruitful effort ever sustained by the human mind. The past four or five centuries, which have gradually destroyed or overshadowed the whole medieval cosmos, have enriched us mentally and morally to an extent unrivaled by any period of similar duration. But its incandescence had fed on the combustion of the Christian heritage in the oxygen of Greek rationalism, and when this fuel was exhausted the critical framework itself burnt away.<sup>4</sup>

For Polanyi himself, the critical framework had burnt itself away, but in many respects and for much of contemporary intellectual culture the critical framework remains intact as the deconstructing force of post-modernism. The consequence is that the shift from a critical to a post-critical orientation is not from modernism to post-modernism but from the critical orientation that they both share to an intellectual ethos beyond them both, a post-critical intellectual ethos, *beyond* post-modernism.

I believe that the following chart contrasting the four intellectual ethoi—pre-modern/pre-critical, modern, post-modern, and post-critical—will help to make clear what I am saying.

The remainder of this paper will be devoted, first, to characterizing the critical project of modernity that is shared by both modernism and deconstructive post-modernism. Second, I will characterize what I take to be the crux of the shift from a critical to a post-critical orientation. Third, I will identify the principal features of a post-critical intellectual ethos which Polanyi's thought opens up.

### **The Critical Project of Both Modernity and Deconstructive Post-Modernity**

To have acquired a modern critical mind is to have been habituated, on the one hand, to distrust one's first and natural inclination to indwell the world believably and, on the other hand, to

	<b>Situatedness (Context) of Claims</b>	<b>Truth &amp; Tradition</b>
<b>Pre-Modern (Pre-Critical) intellectual ethos</b>	Parochially situated but making unqualified, naïvely universal claims.	Truth (territory) is undifferentiated from a tradition's own representations (its maps).
<b>Modern (Critical) intellectual ethos</b>	Makes universal claims allegedly situation-less ("the view from nowhere"); foundationalist (presumes there are absolute criteria for establishing knowledge claims).	Attainment of Truth requires a divorce from tradition-based/bred thinking (escaping any and all situated points of view); Truth is what ends up on the one objective map, same for all.
<b>Post-Modern (Hyper-Critical) intellectual ethos</b> (note continuity with the Modern intellectual ethos, via its inordinate emphasis on methodological doubt)	Avoids universal claims. Because we are radically situated, attaining universality is inconceivable; anti-foundationalist. A radically diverse plurality of perspectives.	Only traditional representations (situated points of view) exist; there is no meaningful sense of transcendent Truth (no territory beyond our maps); the scientific map is just one among others.
<b>Post-Critical intellectual ethos</b> (also construable as "Constructive Post-Modern")	Situated, fallible but makes claims of universal <i>intent</i> ; seeks a horizontal universality/transcendence vs. modernism's presumed vertical universality/transcendence.	Truth regarded as uncertainly glimpsed from within traditions (situated points of view); efforts to attain it are rooted but not confined.

<b>Methodological Faith (fides) &amp; Doubt</b>	<b>Knowable World/ Reality</b>	<b>Objectivity (how achieved)</b>
<p>Unquestioned, uncritical faith (not yet having confronted its finitude and fallibility); methodological doubt toward other 'faiths'.</p>	<p>The world seen from one perspective only; no consideration of how things appear from other perspectives.</p>	<p>Objectivity identified with faithfulness with adherence to cultural authority and its representations.</p>
<p>Aims to purge by methodological doubt <i>all</i> fallible (error prone), fiduciary elements (anything subjective, anything faith-based); (<i>except surreptitiously it keeps faith in methodological doubt and liberal ideals</i>).</p>	<p>One objective world, universally structured (invariant for all); in principle wholly specifiable within a single formal framework (a single perspective of apparent perspectivelessness).</p>	<p>Objectivity attained via a uniformalization—that presumes to transcend all particular perspectives, invariant for all (i.e., adherence to the one map). (<i>Note the unacknowledged place of authority and tradition here.</i>)</p>
<p>Because methodological doubt is dominant, fiduciary, fallible factors are recognized impossible to eliminate or to be transcended, making objectivity and Truth impossible; modern liberal ideals now in question (<i>yet still a methodological faith in the hermeneutic of suspicion</i>).</p>	<p>Each in his/her own separate world (constituted by each different perspective); no confidence of inter-accessibility. The modern uniformalized, "objective" perspective is now seen as only one among others and problematic (not what it pretends to be).</p>	<p>Objectivity deemed impossible (except as appearance, as pretense). Ironically, objectivity of a sort is achieved in repudiating attachment to any one view. (<i>Note the tacit role of authority and tradition here.</i>)</p>
<p>Fiduciary factors seen as a positive though fallible means toward objectivity and Truth; methodological faith and doubt kept in balance, with a chastened faith taking the lead.</p>	<p>One world transcendent to any one perspective, but in principle accessible simultaneously from multiple but partial perspectives, which we seek (one by one) to integrate. Note necessary role of empathy.</p>	<p>Objectivity to be attained via the ongoing intersection of different relevant perspectives; traditional authorities play a subordinate role in affording access to their unique angle onto the world.</p>

entrust oneself to the attitude of critical suspicion as the cardinal intellectual virtue. In post-modern jargon, this attitude has come to be called the “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Modernity (and post-modernity along with it) is premised on the assumption that the root of all error is the inherent human proclivity to project into reality what is not there but only in oneself, in one’s credulity and subjective bias. Our modern intellectual conscience insists that we will get at the truth of the matters that concern us only by divesting ourselves of subjectivity, by stepping outside of our merely personal, commonsense, mindbodily<sup>5</sup> perspectives and by following impersonal, “objective” procedures (i.e., procedures supposed to insure objectivity). In consequence, on reflection at least (self-critical reflection, that is), we moderns have difficulty believing in our own beliefs and trusting without defensiveness in any inward summons to venture beyond the safety of impersonally established truths—unless it be critically to disestablish or deconstruct someone else’s alleged truths. (This is not to say that such critical efforts do not have their rightful place. It is only to say that such efforts become the only encouraged—indeed, the only “safe”—creative work within the modern critical perspective.) Our modern minds largely disable us from venturing to construct or establish anything at all. If our own critical intellectual conscience fails to keep our subjectivity in check, we can be sure that our professional colleagues’ critical faculties will be more than adequate for the job. It should be clear from this that so-called “post-modern” perspectives that define themselves as deconstructive of any and all modern claims to have overcome subjectivity and to have arrived at objective truth are merely a continuation of the modern critical tradition.

Let me be more specific. What is it that makes the critical thinking that distinguishes modernity (and, as I am maintaining, post-modernity) *critical*? It is critical suspicion and doubt that is directed toward distorting contributions of human subjectivity to our knowing of the world—principally that of uncritical belief and credulity. Of course, that critical suspicion and doubt is directed toward the possibility of bias, preconception, prejudice, etc., *but*

*it is also directed toward the very possibility that truth could arise through personal relationship and involvement.* Hence it counsels withdrawal, detachment, a withholding of assent and investment of self—for the purpose of countering and calling into question what is deemed to be subjective and credulous tendencies in ourselves and in human thought and culture generally. In order to avoid the errors of over-belief, modern critical thought deliberately adopts a posture of under-belief and critical suspicion toward every candidate for belief as possibly a projection of human subjectivity (whether of others or of oneself). In other words, its methodological maxim is “*Doubt* (that is, doubt subjectivity, withhold investing oneself in the evident possibilities) *unless the candidate first proves itself worthy of belief* through its overcoming of one’s best efforts to doubt it.” As well, it means “Withhold assent, and even withhold paying serious attention, to any candidate for belief that does not submit itself to an impersonal demonstration of its truth.” *This is the critical project of modernity.* In theory, this method of critical doubt has always been appealed to as the modern gauntlet that all serious claims to knowledge must pass. In practice, however, those to which it is particularly subjected are those candidates for belief that significantly differ from mainstream intellectual opinion among modern intellectuals—especially views and beliefs deriving from pre-modern sources. In other words, almost never has it been directed toward matters taken for granted among modernists—until recently, that is.

Post-modernism’s critical method is basically the same thing, except its methodological doubting is more radical and thoroughgoing, supposedly more honest, for it doesn’t just call into question new candidates for belief. It brings to the surface and calls into question the taken-for-granted latent assumptions of modernity itself, the *faith* of the *tradition-governed practice* of modernism—e.g., the faith that objective truth can be attained, and is being attained, through scientific and other forms of rational inquiry (along with other undemonstrable presuppositions), the confidence that justice and dignity for all can be, and



is being, realized through rationalized modern institutions, and the hope that fraternity can be realized, and is being realized, through modern education and by working cooperatively together in independence of pre-modern practices, etc. (Note: Never before post-modern critiques has it become so clear that modernism, despite its presuming to repudiate tradition-based thinking, consists in a tradition based on faith and structures of authority that normally go without cognizance or acknowledgment. Science, too, for that matter.) Not just withholding belief but actively looking for reasons not to believe, post-modernism critically suspects the latent, distorting subjectivity hidden behind these apparently impersonal, explicitly rationalized programs. Indeed, it doesn't just withhold assent until they prove themselves otherwise. It charges forward in the effort actively to deconstruct them into their subjective components: gender bias, will to power, sexual desire, ethnic domination, racial oppression, social hegemony, social resentment (Nietzsche's *ressentiment*), etc. At times post-modern critiques, in their endeavor to demonstrate that apparently objective understandings are nothing but subjective constructions, are no less aggressively *reductive* than the endeavor of hard-headed modernist materialists to demonstrate that mental phenomena are nothing but electro-chemical operations of the brain, or that of avid scientific naturalists to demonstrate that higher order cultural achievements (including our pursuit of supposedly objective knowledge) are products of mindless evolutionary selection. It would seem that all these endeavors are of a piece.

In short, post-modernism amounts to modernism's critical project turned onto itself. One could without much distortion say that post-modernism is a manifestation of latent contradictions that have been at the core of modernism all along, except that few, if any, thinkers were able to glimpse them until relatively recently and perhaps none until Nietzsche had taken them with full seriousness. Differently put, few—until recently—were in any position to trace radically the contradictory implications of modernism's basic methodological assumptions. So, where does

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this leave us? And what does it leave us with? Those of us initiated into modernity and now, in one respect or another, into post-modernity have difficulty believing in our beliefs and ideals, including those of the Enlightenment. Our first initiation formed a conscience in us that called into question our pre-modern beliefs and ideals. And whereas most of us have embraced, or at one time had come to embrace the beliefs and ideals (i.e., the *faith*) of modernity—whether through how we were raised or through our experience of higher education—our initiation into post-modernity would reform our conscience to call into question these modern beliefs and ideals. It is now a serious question for many of us how we can with intellectual integrity affirm wholeheartedly any of these beliefs and ideals at all. In affirming and pursuing them passionately, given this formation of our intellectual conscience, we cannot help but suspect that we may be deceiving ourselves. This leaves us with what seems to be an inescapable dilemma. Either affirm one's basic beliefs and ideals in a way that seals them off from critical reflection (i.e., dogmatically in a close-minded fundamentalist, absolutist way) or hesitantly affirm them in a way that so qualifies them that they are evacuated of substance (as in "These are my beliefs and ideals, and I realize they are not yours, and I want you to know that I respect you affirming yours, just as you should respect me affirming mine"). In effect, this latter alternative is the relativist "truth for me" and "truth for you"—having done away, for all practical purposes, with truth in any absolute sense. The dilemma, then, *appears* to be either dogmatic absolutism or relativism, with no middle ground. If you don't yet think that this is the position in which deconstructive post-modernism places a person, then simply ask your typical undergraduate students. The deeper question, however, is "Are these the only alternatives?" Is there any other way forward in which our deepest convictions might be wholeheartedly affirmed with intellectual integrity—fully realizing that we are finite and fallible? Is there hope for an integral reformation of our intellectual conscience?

### The Shift from a Critical to a Post-Critical Orientation

If this is the *critical* orientation, then what is a *post-critical* orientation? And what does it take to make the shift from the one to the other?

There are many aspects to the shift which are not easy to summarize in a brief compass. The most central of these can be captured briefly in terms of *a shift from a priority of emphasis upon methodological skepticism to a priority of emphasis upon methodological faith*—but, please note, in a special sense. The former grants priority to active skepticism toward what access to truth we (and anyone else) might be supposed to have in our own persons. It suspiciously regards such presumed access as fraught with “subjectivity” (the projecting proclivities of our self that are liable to distort, bias, and obscure the reality of things). It demands that we distance ourselves from the subject matter and relate to it in a strictly detached, depersonalized way. To the contrary, the latter—a post-critical orientation—grants priority to trust in that personal access, motivating us to draw near to the subject matter in a manner that will enable us to become acquainted with it and bring it to light. Differently put, the shift is from detached, self-critical reserve to active, first-personal indwelling and exploration. In words Polanyi uses to describe this aspect of the shift in *Personal Knowledge*, it is from a detached, “non-committal orientation” in our cognitive endeavors to a “committal orientation.” (“Committal” here does not mean commitment to a given statement of belief or to some specific outcome but rather a passionate personal commitment to pursuing the truth concerning the subject matter in question, truth as transcending and never fully grasped by any particular explicit rendering.) It is crucially important to realize that this shift is key to comprehending the full significance of what Polanyi meant by tacit knowing—namely, entering into a relationship of rapport in one’s own person with what is known. It isn’t just coming to have a different understanding and awareness of what is involved in our knowing. It calls us to enter more profoundly into our knowing of things. The emphasis is on

coming into a relationship of deepening acquaintance and rapport with the known, versus withholding oneself from it.

It is easy to mistake what the shift from methodological skepticism to methodological faith means (so I have found in attempting to explain it to students and to colleagues). The methodological faith to which Polanyi gives priority is not at all a standpoint of uncritical credulity or subjectivism. To many it seems so because the taken-for-granted critical perspective of modernity induces us to imagine ourselves not in an active exploratory relationship to reality but as confronted with competing explicit candidates for belief, which we are given critically to doubt or uncritically to believe. In such a situation, Polanyi's proposal of methodological faith seems on the surface to counsel uncritical belief. But the shift that Polanyi proposes opens up—beyond deciding between explicit representations (and beyond the sterile alternatives of critical doubt and uncritical belief)—a whole other dimension and a whole other response: the tacit, unarticulated dimension of the reality which these representations purport to map (which Polanyi maintains is essentially inexhaustible), a dimension of reality to which we have cognitive access only as we reach out to explore it for ourselves and in our own persons in *a-critical* (neither critical nor uncritical) methodological faith.<sup>6</sup> The crucial thing to recognize is that we are blind and insensible to this dimension and to this response apart from the methodological faith which ventures in one's own person to find hidden unarticulated truth. The methodological faith in question is thus directed not to explicit candidates for belief (even ones we happen to come up with ourselves) but to our access to this dimension and our investigative forays into it—i.e., to truth as transcendental: as apprehensible (in part) yet also transcending our own best efforts to render it explicit. As well, it is directed to the access that other knowers have to this dimension, to encouragement and trust in them to investigate it along with us, in order to uncover aspects that we might otherwise overlook and hopefully to confirm the insights which we will have ourselves received.

The methodological skepticism that more or less defines the *critical* orientation of modern thought, then, is marked by critical suspicion toward subjectivity as such—not only toward bias, preconception, prejudice, etc., but also toward the possibility that truth might come to light through personal relationship and involvement. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi calls this fundamental strategy radically into question, contending that adoption of methodological skepticism across the board (at least where it is most seriously adopted and consistently followed through) represses, interferes with, and in some cases actually debilitates, *the personal fiduciary powers that enable us to transcend the distortions of subjectivity and credulousness and achieve contact with objective reality*. To the contrary, a post-critical philosophical orientation, fully aware of the inescapable fallibility of these powers (an awareness gained in large measure from the insights produced by the modern critical tradition), nevertheless recognizes that *these powers of methodological believing (i.e., of personal indwelling, of following up and integrating clues to hidden truth, of struggling to articulate what is only vaguely sensed, etc.) are ultimately our only resort*—being a wellspring of all genuine discovery and creativity.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the critical philosophical orientation follows the strategy *Doubt, unless there is good reason to believe*, a post-critical philosophical orientation adopts the inverse methodological strategy *Believe (that is, believe in this quest for truth in one's own person) unless, and until, there arises good reason to doubt (that is, doubt toward the current mode of investing oneself in seeking)*. In other words, trust, indwell, venture, put yourself into it, until there arises good reason to withdraw and withhold yourself. Its priority is more upon seeking truth—truth yet unknown or incompletely understood—than avoiding error, more upon finding meaning than avoiding deception. To attain truth one must, again and again, risk being wrong. The critical strategy is to minimize the risk of being wrong. The post-critical strategy realizes that minimizing the risk in this way maximizes the loss of truth and meaning.<sup>8</sup>

A *post-critical* orientation of reflective thought is character-

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ized by methodological believing no less than methodological doubting, with priority placed on the former, by empathetic exploration of perspectives beyond one's own no less than critical suspicion, reaching out and indwelling no less than withdrawal and detachment, by venturing into the unknown, "pouring oneself" into the particulars of a problem in pursuit of a hidden coherence, and investing oneself in a quest to discover and bring to light some important truth no less than withholding oneself. The latter of each of these pairings continues to have its place. A post-critical orientation is not a reversion to an uncritical orientation. But methodological believing is given a relatively higher or first priority: less absence than presence, less an absencing of the self of the knower from what is known than an appropriate, responsible drawing near and becoming present of knower to known in however partial, aspectual, and incomplete a way. Thereby, instead of seeking approximation to some universal, 'objective,' depersonalized knower—formally indistinguishable from every other 'objective' knower from having suppressed all that situates and incarnates her knowing as unique and distinct from that of other knowers—the knower forthrightly discloses and acknowledges the situatedness, partiality, and fallibility of her knowing in the world alongside other knowers while nevertheless affirming her findings with universal intent.<sup>9</sup> She does so in the faith that this situatedness does not separate her from reality—as both modernity and deconstructive post-modernity have supposed—but, when taken up actively in quest of truth, connects her with it. Her knowing, her finite situated being, her person, on the one hand, and her connection with the known, her contact with the known, on the other, are inseparable. Knowing thus conceived is incarnate, in the world, in relationship and rapport with what is known. Thereby, as well, the knower becomes knowable, or rather is knowable, in her knowing. The knower is not located (isolated) in some Cartesian discarnate interior—nor in the neural networks of her cerebral cortex—inaccessible to other fellow-knowers, but, via empathetic indwelling, commonsensically alongside other persons, knowable and known in her knowing. The tacit dimension

of human knowing which Polanyi post-critically brings to our attention encompasses all this.

It is important to realize that Polanyi does not counsel us to give up being critical. He is counseling us to give up being *inappropriately critical*, to give up being inappropriately distant and impersonal when our being personally and vulnerably present is called for, to give up adherence to methodological suspicion and doubt as the supreme test for all candidates for belief. This criterion, when taken by itself, leaves out of consideration several crucial factors. First, we need good reason to doubt no less than good reason to believe. Second, our most fundamental presuppositions in a given area of inquiry are incapable of being justified to the satisfaction of skeptical doubt, and so must be accepted for that inquiry *acritically* (neither critically nor uncritically) on methodological faith. In this respect, the modern tradition of methodological doubt is itself ironically animated by an unacknowledged *acritical* methodological faith—including the unacknowledged faith that truth to the contrary of what is being doubted will somehow come to light through the process of doubting. Third, whereas critical doubt is a *distancing strategy*, involving the removal of our personal presence in and with the matter under consideration, there are many matters that would never be known and, in many cases, understood without our personal presence, participation, and involvement in order to understand, bring to the surface, and discover them—e.g., our knowledge of other persons both within our culture and within alien cultures, and qualitative dimensions of a subject matter that would be otherwise lost to us by remaining at a distance and focusing merely on, say, quantitative measures. Some evidence is not evident at all apart from this kind of involvement and, in many cases, specialized training in learning how to perceive it, to develop the sensibility to apprehend it. Feminist epistemology has appropriately called this “connected knowing,” as distinct from “separate knowing.”<sup>10</sup>

### Principal Features of a Post-Critical Intellectual Ethos

Polanyi is not alone in helping us grope our way to a post-critical intellectual ethos. There are a number of recent and contemporary thinkers who have pondered at length on what is at the root of the problematic character of modernism-culminating-in-post-modernism and who, pretty much independently, have begun to converge on similar assessments of the problem and suggestions of how one might begin to move beyond it to an ethos beyond post-modernism.<sup>11</sup>

Not all of them speak explicitly of seeking to foster the emergence of an intellectual ethos beyond post-modernism, though some do. Not all use the same words and phrases to identify it. Some identify with a positive or constructive side of post-modernism. Some have chosen to use the phrase “constructive post-modernism” or “ecological post-modernism” to refer to it. Others speak of “beyond” or “after” post-modernism, and accordingly use such acronyms as BPM or APM. Still others, perhaps most of them, identify with a single feature or aspect of a post-critical orientation only and emphasize that feature alone—as in communitarianism, the new traditionalism, caring or connected thinking as a counterbalance and complement to critical or separated thinking, and disciplined empathy as a distinctive mode of inquiry and knowing. While each of these features has significant value, it is important to recognize that they are all contributing to the collective emergence of a new intellectual ethos that encompasses them all. All call for a radical reworking, either directly or indirectly, of our conceptions of reason and rationality, of objectivity and subjectivity, of self and other, of experience and language, of faith and doubt, and other very basic categories that, they contend, have been fundamentally misconstrued or impoverished within the modern conceptual repertoire. It is too soon to say that there is a full consensus among them, especially about what specific thing or things need fixing and how they should be fixed, though many would say there is something akin to a consensus emerging among them about such things. It is important to say, however, that they are not all talking together,



and many of them seem not to know of the existence of each other's work. I'm talking here about something that for many is still in process of emerging and slowly being articulated among many thinkers in different places.

Sticking primarily with Polanyi's understanding, however, there are several features characteristic of a post-critical intellectual ethos that are shared by many of these thinkers—features that are worth mentioning here.

(1) *Methodological faith*. What Polanyi means by methodological faith at its heart is a distinctive kind of personal participation and involvement in inquiry. It is not constituted by a certain content or set of beliefs or commitment to a certain outcome to the inquiry. Rather is it a mode of generically investing and trusting ourselves to the process of inquiry and to any preparation requisite for the inquiry to succeed, and an opening of ourselves to whatever surprises the inquiry may turn up. It essentially involves a movement of tacit integration, of reaching out to make sense of the whole of the matters in question. It includes as well methodological reliance upon (i.e., trying out) certain assumptions that might seem contrary to what we are accustomed to relying on in order to follow up the promise they intimate of a new, more coherent, and profounder understanding of a subject matter. We often have to get personally involved and connected with a thing *in ways appropriate to the subject matter and for our purposes* in order to come to know and appreciate it for what it is. In that sense the operating maxim of methodological faith is *believe, unless and until one has a good reason to doubt*—and we owe it to ourselves and each other to be alert to and ready to take into account any good reason to doubt that comes along. The faith of methodological faith is not blind, nor is it an assertion of some presumed state of affairs. It is a way of coming to apprehend and know something, a means of reaching out to apprehend more clearly what is only dimly glimpsed. It is, to be sure a risk that may turn out to be wrong, but what it fallibly apprehends is not otherwise apprehendable. In any case, the point is not to replace methodological doubt with methodological faith, but to bring

something that is and has been out of balance back into balance with its complement, realizing that *all* inquiry—including *modernism's unacknowledged trust in methodological doubt*—is irreducibly reliant on methodological faith.

(2) *Fallibility*. If all of our inquiry and knowing is in some sense based upon elements of methodological faith (e.g., basic presuppositions, certain strategies of inquiry, a traditional practice to which we have been apprenticed, confident articulateness in the language we speak, trust in our embodied ability to move about and manipulate things, etc.), that cannot be explicitly justified so as to remove every possible occasion for doubt then all our supposed knowledge and understanding of things is fallible and the modern quest for an infallible ground of knowing is nonsense. The deconstructive post-modernist concludes from this that knowledge is therefore impossible. Given this inveterate fallibility, we could be wrong in one or more respects, perhaps even comprehensively. If we can be wrong, then how can we be said to know? A post-critical conception says that, knowledge does not require certainty. Justification, as needed, only requires meeting reasonable doubt, not unreasonable doubt, not doubt for doubt's sake. The radical skeptic does not need to be convinced, though he does have a point: our strivings are based on a faith that cannot be eliminated. Insofar as a person's claim to know is accompanied by reasons good enough to counter reasonable doubt, though they be not absolutely conclusive, the burden of proof is shifted off of the claimant to the skeptic.

(3) *A partial and perspectival grasp of things*. Just as methodological faith introduces to our knowing ventures a fallibility that must be acknowledged and cannot be eliminated, so also it renders our grasp of things partial and perspectival—indeed, forever incomplete. Acknowledgement of the methodological faith-component of our knowing calls attention to how we always come at the subject matter in question from some particular certain angle of approach (both literally and figuratively), a certain perspective on, and mode of access to, the subject matter that differs from the perspective of other inquirers whose meth-

odological faith may differ more or less from our own. We each come at it simultaneously from different angles of approach and accordingly are in a position to pick up on different aspects of it. But contrary to the pessimistic picture often articulated among post-modernists, it is possible to communicate a great deal among persons of different perspectives about the world in common between us. We are not hermetically sealed off from each other within Cartesian inner mental worlds. If it were so, we couldn't make sense of differing perspectives on something in the first place. On the contrary, we are incarnate knowers, ranged alongside one another, concerned with things in a world common among us. Precisely in light of that circumstance we are able to recognize that each of us comes at things from a different angle, constituted not just by the placement of one's body, but also by the mind-set and subculture (including language) that we bring with us. Remarkably, we can be and are aware of this at the very moment we are seeing things from our own perspective. (This does not mean that all points of view are equivalent in worth and validity; some give better access than others, as can be learned by trying them out.) Moreover, we can, through the practice of disciplined empathy, learn much of what the other person is able to perceive of the matter in question between us, and confirm that we have indeed learned that. This means that (1) we each can become aware that there are aspects of the subject matter in question (between us) that escape our current direct apprehension, and (2) that we can learn of those other aspects from each other and so enrich our comprehension of the subject matter. We may well learn that an alternative perspective from the one we currently occupy would afford us a much better view, and so we may end up shifting our point of view.

(4) *A new, deeper understanding of common sense.* Recognition of the partial, perspectival grasp we have of things, in turn, brings to light still other factors inherent in a post-critical intellectual ethos—namely, our incarnateness (though not imprisonment) in a particular point of view (from which we can shift into and explore other points of view); consequently, the possibil-

ity of being known by others in our knowing from a given point of view; the fact that we are here together, respectively ranged about matters in common among us, each of us, perceiving and interpreting it from different points of view simultaneously; the possibility of coming to know and learn from points of view other than our own through disciplined empathy; and therewith the possibility of mutual recognition (i.e., the possibility, say, of your recognizing me in my knowing and of my simultaneous recognition of your recognition of me, and vice versa). In different words, mutual recognition is the possibility of your seeing that I see the same thing that you see while, *simultaneously*, I see that you see it too. This miracle of mutual recognition at the root of common sense making is one of the more important things that a post-critical orientation opens up, though it has been rarely noticed or acknowledged.<sup>12</sup>

(5) *Reality transcending any one point of view, yet accessible and knowable (in part) by each.* If and insofar as our knowing of things is perspectival and we recognize that fact, then what it is that we know—what we take to be real—is thereby *both* in certain respects present to and accessible via each of our perspectives *and*, in other respects, also transcendent to each of our perspectives. It is transcendent insofar as it is accessible in different respects to another perspective than the respects in which it is accessible to our own (and vice versa). We can learn something about these other respects through the process of disciplined empathy and, in some cases, by actually shifting our own perspective to take into account aspects that previously we failed to notice. Moreover, we are dimly aware of an indefinite multiplicity of still other, possible perspectives through which the thing in question may yet be accessible in still further (though for us quite indefinite) respects. That is to say, taking this perspectival nature of our own knowing into account, the awareness grows that the reality we are capable of knowing has aspects that inexhaustibly escape our current awareness, even if we were to take each of our respective perspectival knowings into account. The marvelous thing about this is that this transcendent character of reality can

thereby be recognized (cognitively grasped) as having this inexhaustible character, though explaining how we do so presents quite a challenge (no less than the marvelous phenomenon of mutual recognition does as well).

(6) *New understandings of objectivity and subjectivity.* This transcendent character of reality implies a resolution to how objectivity (and subjectivity) might be reconceived in a post-critical intellectual ethos. At its root, objectivity means what pertains to the object itself, above and beyond any distorting contributions that might come from the knowing subject, the knower. Accordingly, subjectivity in this respect means distortions in an apprehension of the object known contributed by the knowing subject, due to prejudice, preconception, bias, etc. The modernist conception of objectivity does not rest with this understanding, for it identifies objectivity with a distancing strategy that would leave human subjectivity decisively behind and so attain “the view from nowhere,” a perspective that would supposedly be the same for all and identifiable with none. In practice this is supposed to be accomplished by coming up with an impersonal, strictly formalized set of propositions (“objective knowledge”) representing the object in a way that will be the same for all. (Subjectivity, accordingly, has been identified with anything that cannot be so rendered, anything that does not adhere to this distancing strategy.) The trouble is that this modern strategy to achieve objectivity, as post-modernists point out, never escapes being the point of view of some persons in particular—usually seeking to exert power by its means—that is to say, it remains one point of view among others but unable to acknowledge itself as such. More often than not, it is then hegemonically imposed upon others as the way things objectively are. By way of contrast, within a post-critical ethos, objectivity is reconceived, in a manner closer to the root meaning, to mean drawing closer in our understanding to the object itself in its transcendence beyond any one perspective. In this manner, objectivity and universality are in intent commonsensically achieved through progressively taking into account what can be accessed through the indefinite

multiplicity of different perspectives relevant to the object. Accordingly, subjectivity, post-critically conceived, will be anything that hinders this convergence and integration of perspectives. (Think of this in direct contrast to our contemporary experience of the insular specialization that takes place within academic disciplines, where objectivity is still for the most part mistakenly supposed to require this insularity.)

(7) *Personal transcendence*. Now if objectivity in knowledge is reconceived to involve a progressive integration of what can be known of a given matter from the indefinite multiplicity of different relevant perspectives, then not only is a disciplined empathetic exploration of other perspectives requisite to objectivity, but persons who dedicate themselves to doing so responsibly may be said thereby to transcend their own subjectivity. This self-transcendence achieved through responsible personal involvement and judgment is what led Polanyi to distinguish what is *personal* from what is *subjective* in cognitive matters, and why he titled his *magnum opus*, *Personal Knowledge*. Responsible personal judgment is both objective and personal at the same time. One could say, then, that all knowledge is a human construction, as post-modernists would typically put it, but not all constructions are subjective; some can and should be asserted, as Polanyi put it, with universal intent and may then rightly be judged objectively true—i.e., judged that they actually connect with and engage objective reality in its transcendence. This, of course, does not mean that such assertions and judgments are infallible or that they are more complete or less perspectival than they in fact are. A proper humility, an avoidance of presumption, and an owning up to one's own fallible and perspectival hold on the world as fallible and perspectival is, of course, more requisite than ever—and more clear why it must be so.

(8) *All knowing as a "from-to stretch," reaching out to achieve universal truth*: As is clear from what has been said already, in a post-critical intellectual ethos, all knowing is incarnately situated—indeed, it is through and through fraught with its tacit roots in a particular time, place, body, personal history, subculture(s),

language, and tradition-governed practice of knowing. I say 'tradition-governed practice of knowing' to call attention to the way the tacit dimension of our knowing, as Polanyi makes clear, is developed and shaped through a process of mentoring and apprenticeship embodied in particular traditions, which are never simply made up of explicit beliefs passed down from generation to generation. Such traditions are always more than the explicit beliefs they happen to transmit; they are, in addition, each a way of knowing the world from within a certain perspective. I have just finished saying that at times persons transcend their rootedness in a given tradition's perspective to connect with objective reality that is manifest in indefinitely multiple ways to other points of view than that defined by the situation in which these persons are (and may well remain) rooted. The key thing is that persons who realize such transcendence have not allowed the confines of that situation to dictate reality, but rather have relied upon that situational rootedness in such a way that it grants them access to a reality (and to other points of view onto that reality) that transcends what was directly accessible to, and in, that situation. The same sub cultural tradition, a traditional practice of knowing, thus can serve either as something negative, narrow, and confining (regarded critically from without, in a focal, exteriorized manner), or as something positive—an opening up, and a liberating thing (regarded post-critically from within)—depending on how it is up-taken and lived out.

Differently put, particular situations in which persons might be said to be parochially rooted provide them with a map of reality, a map, say, of a certain territory. Persons who simply accept the map they inherit do not transcend the subjectivity of their subculture. They may be said to know a certain part of reality, but only certain aspects from a certain perspective. Or more strictly, they may be said to take at second hand such a knowledge. But it is likely they will have little idea of its partial and perspectival character and perhaps be unaware of its fallibility. On the other hand, the person who transcends her given subjectivity does not leave her situatedness and given map behind, but

instead takes it as a clue to something much bigger, which she progressively supplements as her inquiry proceeds, taking in more and more of what she learns about the territory itself from clues found in other maps and other points of view. The goal is a knowledge of what is so, of what is objectively real, for all (universally), even though most others may not transcend beyond their own respective partial and perspectival views. Note that the from-to, contingent stretch is from what is situated and local—the clues and intimations of meaning and reality which we rely on to make sense of things—to what is objective and universal. All knowing is a fallible venture toward the objective and universal from—while it is still rooted within—what nevertheless is local and particular.

(9) *Knowing as relational acquaintance.* It should be obvious by what I have said so far that a post-critical paradigm of what constitutes knowledge has shifted considerably from possession of a set of formal propositions that are supposed to be an accurate impersonal representation, some kind of impersonal mapping, of an independently given objective reality. It has become an incarnate, mindbodily acquaintance-relationship in one's own person with the reality in question, supplemented by successively taking into account other relevant points of view. Derivative from this acquaintance-relationship, one will have, or can provide, a map of that reality.

Many post-modernists speak of our being caught in the trap of language and having no possibility of relating to what lies outside of language, outside of what has been already 'objectified' (i.e., categorized and pigeonholed, made 'not other') in terms of a given language. On the contrary, the way one connects with reality in its 'otherness' beyond language is precisely through our tacit mindbodily acquaintance with it. Insofar as this is so, *knowing* (emphasizing the verbal-active character of knowledge, in its cognate form, rather than the passive connotations of the noun *knowledge*) may be said to be primarily tacit and rooted in tacit knowing (tacit here meaning non-, or not presently, explicit). This is a major theme of Polanyi's writing, which demonstrates



how this is so throughout the natural sciences and not only in non-scientific fields of knowing, in contrast to the modernist picture of scientific knowing as wholly detached and impersonal. Even in the abstract and abstruse realms of quantum physics on the one hand, and astrophysics on the other, we become acquainted with these realms by means of our bodies assimilating to themselves (to our embodied self) the instruments of scientific knowing and well-confirmed scientific theories as instrumental extensions of the reach of our embodied knowing.

(10) *The knowing body as subject rather than object.* The body of the knower is reconceived not as a focus of attention, objectified through scientific knowing, but the body as subject both already in and responsively attuned to the world. And more: the body as ground or basis of our more personal subject as we develop and mature through our acquisition of language and other forms of human culture. This sense and experience of the body as subject has been extensively explored and has been well described through the work of phenomenology in the twentieth century, and especially through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and work inspired by him. Polanyi's work largely converges with this work, especially that of Merleau-Ponty. The body thus understood is the primary means of our presence to and with things other than ourselves, with the help of various cultural means to extend its reach and sophisticate its powers of representation.

(11) *Creative powers of novel articulation.* Some post-modernists have argued that human experience is so thoroughly imbued with what is conceived to be the determinate confines of our language and culture that there is no sense in which we ever experience what lies outside of language and culture. But this is simply false—false for two reasons. First, upon the basis of our experience of being *embodied human subjects in the world* that we share with all human beings, regardless of culture—both pre-linguistically and linguistically—we do succeed in making sense in common with persons of language and culture vastly different from our own, reaching beyond the limited horizon of our

subculture and language. Second, as explained by the philosopher-psychologist Eugene Gendlin (whose thinking, Gendlin affirms, is fully consonant with Polanyi's thinking)—it is from our as yet inarticulate *felt bodily sense of things* that all new creative articulations emerge, from solutions to psychological conflicts, to poetic images, to scientific theories. It is precisely in such experiences that novel linguistic usages and meanings arise, and it is part of the genius of human language that it is open to novel articulations. Our lived body-subject is not a determinate thing; from within, it is an opened-out way of being present to things and other persons and of responsively interacting with them. As well, it is the ground of all saying, and all doing through what we say.

(11) *A vertical, qualitative dimension to things.* Finally, a post-critical intellectual ethos, through its understanding of connected/relational knowing by acquaintance, opens out upon a knowing of things that is oriented less toward the goals of prediction and control—such as we find in the technological uses of scientific knowledge—and more toward contemplation and the appreciation of things for their own sake. This is a knowing that not only includes a qualitative, valuational, or normative dimension; it is oriented to discovering the intrinsic worth and meaning that can be found in things and persons and situations. It is oriented to discovering and acknowledging realizations of normative value that we call achievements in every level of functioning of living organisms up through the inherent dignity in human beings (perhaps higher mammals as well) to moral greatness in persons we rightly honor and revere. There is a vertical, qualitative dimension in things, particularly in living organisms—of lower and higher, of lesser and greater worth, of levels of progressive emergence and irreducible wholeness and complexity—to which a merely quantitative analysis of the sort we find in much of science is oblivious, if not blind. A post-critical ethos is one for which this dimension of things can be re-acknowledged and re-appropriated, and one in which a greater sensibility for apprehending can be cultivated.

This brings us finally to one of the issues with which we

started: how is it possible to wholeheartedly affirm with intellectual integrity the transcendent values and ideals that impassion us? So far as we re-conceive some of our most basic conceptions—our values—in a post-critical frame of reference, a sensitivity to the problematic subjectivity that can corrupt and manipulate them that we have gained through both modern and post-modern criticism need not disable us from wholeheartedly reaffirming these values and the higher level of “reality” that Polanyi assigns to them. Truth, justice, beauty, integrity, human dignity, fraternity, liberty, and the like are still—and rightly—as impassioning as ever.

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#### NOTES

1. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

2. At a crucial point in *Personal Knowledge* (265ff), Polanyi identifies the turn to a post-critical philosophy as a recovery of balance between our cognitive powers of belief on the one hand and doubt (i.e., “demonstrable knowledge”) on the other, specifically a recovery from the state of imbalance wrought by the critical movement’s rejection of the one in favor of exclusive confidence in the other. The path to recovery of balance for Polanyi lies in a re-appropriation of Augustine’s insight that belief is the mind’s cognitive power for anticipating knowledge as a gift of grace: “*nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*” [“Unless ye believe, ye shall not understand.”]

3. See the explanatory online essay, “Constructive Postmodernism” by John B. Cobb: <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2220>>

4. *Personal Knowledge*, 265–66.

5. The neologism “mindbodily” was coined by William H. Poteat in his *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical*

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*Logic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985).

6. See Polanyi's careful differentiation of *a-critical* from both *critical* and *uncritical* in *Personal Knowledge*, p. 264 and following.

7. See *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 264–268.

8. I wish to acknowledge here my indebtedness to a discussion of these matters by William James. See, in particular, his well known essay, "The Will to Believe," widely anthologized—e.g., in *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. by Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner, 1952), 88–109. In many respects, but by no means all, James' thinking converges with Polanyi's.

9. See what Polanyi says about "universal intent" as distinct from universality in *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 78, and then in *Personal Knowledge*, 300–303.

10. See volume 34, no.1 (2007–8) of *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, which is devoted to exploring the convergence of the work of Blythe Clinchy, one of the co-authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (1986; repr. New York: Basic Books, 1997) and a co-editor of *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), with the thought of Michael Polanyi.

11. I have in mind such thinkers as Charles Taylor, Eugene Gendlin, Blythe Clinchy, Benjamin DeMott, Parker Palmer, Stephen Toulmin, Alasdair MacIntyre, Hans Georg Gadamer, Jurgen Habermas, Richard Bernstein, William H. Poteat, Robert Bellah, Bruce Wilshire, E. F. Schumacher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Ludwig Wittgenstein (in his later work), Hannah Arendt, and Christopher Alexander.

12. This articulation of common sense I have drawn from the work of Hannah Arendt, particularly from her *magnum opus*, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).