
Michael Polanyi (1891–1976): Introduction to an Unfinished Revolution

This year, 2008, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Michael Polanyi's magnum opus, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*,¹ provides the occasion not only for the celebration of this ground-breaking philosophical work and an extensive *corpus* of related works by Polanyi—some ten books, one hundred, thirty-three published essays, plus an additional hundred or so unpublished writings²—but also for the celebration of a great man. Michael Polanyi was arguably one of the most important prophetic voices—if not *the* most important prophetic voice—of the twentieth century. Certainly deserving of close ranking with him would be, to my thinking, such outstanding figures as Michael Oakeshott, Eric Voegelin, and Bertrand de Jouvenal. (I note that, with the present symposium, *The Political Science Reviewer* has organized a symposium in recognition of each one of these individuals.)

It is difficult to imagine anyone who, throughout his or her adult years, was more directly immersed than was Michael Polanyi in the major cataclysmic events of the twentieth century. At the onset of World War I, this twenty-three-year-old native of Budapest volunteered to serve in the trenches as a medical officer for the Austro-Hungarian army. Four years later, he witnessed the punitive consequences of being on the losing side: dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, within a year, the takeover and demolishing of the newly-formed Hungarian republic by a Communist regime. After a subsequent series of abortive revolts, a year later—in 1919—the Communist government was overthrown and replaced by a still more oppressive regime, headed by Nicolas Horthy, who—even

before he allied himself with Hitler—launched a program to exterminate Jews, among other minorities. Polanyi fled to Germany. This virtual dictatorship would continue until it was, by the enigmatic logic of alliance between despots, overthrown by Hitler in 1944.

After the Communist revolution in Russia and, subsequently, Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Michael Polanyi—himself a non-observing Jew who, in 1919 (shortly after Horthy came to power and just before fleeing to Germany), had converted to Christianity—lost members of his own family to both the Soviet gulag and the Nazi Holocaust. Seeing his closest Jewish colleagues and friends dismissed from their jobs as a result of German anti-Semitic legislation, in 1933 he escaped with his family to England. From there he witnessed, until the end of the Second World War, what he perceived as a continuation of forces that threatened the very existence of Western civilization in Europe. And even after the victory of Allied forces, he witnessed the global expansion of Communism, once again engulfing his homeland.

As difficult as it is to imagine this interminable sequence of horrendous events that characterized most of his adulthood, it is perhaps not much less difficult to imagine the intellectually almost-idyllic first two decades of Polanyi's life. It was a rarefied environment not unlike that captured in the dramatic trilogy *The Coast of Utopia*—Tom Stoppard's portrayal of *fin de siècle* conversations among a group of Russian intelligentsia.³ It was, indeed, an intellectually stimulating atmosphere in which Michael grew up. His unusually talented and energetic mother, Cecile, channeled most of her energy for thirty years—beginning ten years before Michael's birth—into her weekly literary salons, frequented by some of the most renowned luminaries of the time. (Budapest was then the center of European *avant-garde* intellectual ferment, as Paris would become later.) Polanyi's earliest memories, well before he himself was old enough to become a participant, were of his eavesdropping on these lively discussions. A great many of them were prompted by Cecile's fascination with current socialist and anarchist thought. These discussions could, not inaptly, be characterized as a mix, on the one hand, of "modernity's" demand for doctrinal clarity and certainty as

the only perceived alternative to doubt and, on the other hand, of “post-modernity’s” contentment with relativistic subjectivism, against which Michael—long before he would assign these terms any epistemological significance—soon found himself in revolt, even as his older brother, Karl, had already found his ideological grounding in them. Among the essayists that follow, Dale Cannon will provide an in-depth exploration of these concepts and of the term that Polanyi would adopt to characterize his alternative approach: “post-critical.”

Straight out of his “model school” *gymnasium*, Polanyi undertook training to become a physician. By the time he received his medical degree in 1914, he had already decided that his preference was for a career of research in physical chemistry. Indeed, in 1913, at the age of 22, he had already enrolled for a year of study in this advanced field and, although subsequently he took up a brief private medical practice, all the while he had already begun to write learned papers in physical chemistry. In 1914 and 1915, during his military service, he carried on correspondence with Albert Einstein. The paper that finally emerged from his episodic research during the war was accepted by the University of Budapest in 1916 for him to develop further toward a Ph.D. thesis, which he would successfully defend two years later.

In 1916 Polanyi was furloughed to receive medical treatment for a serious illness. Subsequently he was assigned to serve in a military hospital away from the front, during which time he managed to continue his scientific research and writing—as well as to engage often in lively and worldly discourse, reminiscent of his mother’s salon sessions, with a group of nine other intellectuals that included Bela Balazs, Karl Mannheim, and George Lukács. Throughout this entire period, up until his official retirement from active military duty in August 1917 (a year before Germany conceded the defeat of the Central Powers), he continued to prepare and establish himself as a physical chemist.

Polanyi’s flight from Hungary to Germany in 1919 marked the beginning of a distinguished thirty-year, full-time career in that rapidly emerging field of science. Still, throughout his career,

Polanyi felt impelled to speak out and to publish occasional essays on politics and economics. Indeed, his first published non-scientific essay had already appeared in 1917, in which he attempted—with considerable depth of insight—to account for the severe disruptions he had witnessed and to suggest some remedies based on his developing theories of political and economic freedom. In two of the essays that follow, Walter Gulick and Mark Mitchell will address this important facet of his thinking.

During his long career, the more-than-two-hundred publications reporting the results of his scientific research considerably outnumbered all that he would eventually publish as a political and economic theoretician and philosopher, and they would gain for him a more extensive recognition among his colleagues. But it eventually became apparent to him that the mounting threats to world order demanded that he give them more of his attention. At the same time, it was becoming increasingly clear to him that—as important as it was to deal with the political and economic manifestations of these problems—the problems were, at a more fundamental level, broadly cultural and civilizational, and, as such, they called for a considerable depth of philosophical investigation and understanding. Their resolution, to his thinking, required no less than an understanding of the evolution of Western civilization in the modern period—more specifically, a challenge to modern man’s misplaced devotion to a fundamental misconception of what constitutes scientific inquiry and, more broadly, truly responsible, creative, and rational thinking. His years of experience in actually *doing* science, not simply theorizing *about* it, had equipped him well to challenge such misconceptions. And it would later become evident that his plunge afresh into philosophy, despite his having received none of the formal training that “professional,” or academic, philosophers consider the *sine qua non* of their credentialing—rather than preventing his attainment of true philosophic insight—instead, freed him from the kind of paradigmatic blinders that, to this day, seem to distract many in the philosophical profession from even recognizing the more important questions, much less addressing them.

In 1948, after about five years of diverting a rapidly increasing

amount of his attention to these more pressing issues, at the age of fifty-seven, this eminent scientist decided, to the dismay of many of his colleagues who were convinced he was but a short step away from receiving a Nobel Prize, to devote himself full-time to philosophy—primarily to that field within philosophical inquiry known as “epistemology,” that is, the exploration of how we come to know that which we can properly claim to know. Polanyi was convinced that, apart from sheer human moral perversity, it was essentially a false epistemology that lay at the roots of the massively destructive movements and events of the twentieth century. He took up his new career with a firm sense of obligation and purpose. Isaiah Berlin, however, probably expressed the sentiments of a good number of Michael’s colleagues when he exclaimed, “These Hungarians are strange . . . here is a great scientist giving up the Nobel to write mediocre works of philosophy!”⁴

Polanyi was encouraged, in part, by an invitation extended in 1947 to present his social and economic thinking in 1949 in a series of Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen University in Scotland. He immediately perceived the invitation as an opportunity to provide fuller definition to his philosophical thought, and twice he successfully pleaded for delaying the delivery of the series, finally rescheduling the first segment (of ten lectures) for delivery in May of 1951 and the second segment (of ten) for delivery in November 1952. When the time arrived, he felt that he had indeed worked out the fundamental and revolutionary principles of his epistemology, which would eventually form the core structure of his anticipated major work, *Personal Knowledge*.

Although he was pleased with the reception he received for the first series, he was disappointed with the response to the second series, in which he felt he had developed more fully the revolutionary nature of his philosophy, but which appeared to have been unappreciated. In my only direct conversation with Polanyi many years later, in 1970, during most of a day he generously devoted to me in Oxford, he indicated—as he had to others—his disappointment at having gained appreciation from very few of his own academic compatriots for what he was attempting (probably not surprising if one considers

the narrow focus of British philosophy on logical positivism, à la A. J. Ayer, at the time), as well as his gratification for the considerably better reception his views had received on American campuses, at least outside of the departments of philosophy (the latter apparently being only slightly less rigid in their orthodoxies than in England).

During the several years following his Gifford Lectures, Polanyi devoted himself primarily to the further development and refinement of his thoughts in a number of presentations he made through distinguished lectureships at major universities in the United States—these finally, in 1958, taking the form of his signature work, *Personal Knowledge*. Key concepts of his epistemology would receive still further reworking in subsequent publications, such as *The Tacit Dimension*, originally published by Doubleday in 1966 (to be reissued by the University of Chicago Press in 2009).

The major concepts of Polanyi's epistemology—(1) the idea that all knowledge is either tacit or tacitly-based; (2) the understanding of discovery in terms of a process of proceeding along a heuristic gradient guided by tacit intimations; (3) his challenge to C. P. Snow's long—and still—reigning bifurcation of the academic disciplines between the “hard” sciences and the humanities (ironic, since the latter, along with the social “sciences,” have long aspired to emulate the former in their methodologies) in favor of an ordering of these various modes of knowing along an integrated and holistic continuum, based upon a far more sophisticated and perceptive understanding of the scientific endeavor; (4) a new and far more dynamic definition of reality that avoids the old dualisms and is based on an object's or an idea's potential for revealing itself in “indeterminate future manifestations”; (5) a trusting reliance upon the human capacity both to accept with humility the inevitability of error and, eventually, cooperatively to succeed in accessing truth; (6) his full assignment of the status of knowledge even to that which we may never be able fully to articulate or explicitly prove—all of these are insights that, truly and without exaggeration, represent a “Copernican revolution” in both philosophic thought and what have become our more common-place understandings. As some of the essayists in this symposium suggest, (1) Polanyi's response to modernism is his

“post-critical” epistemology, that is, his “personal,” or fiducial, and tacitly-based epistemology, and (2) his answer to post-modernism is essentially his related ontology of realism—proposals that, when openly considered, would seem to be as persuasive as they are, admittedly, revolutionary.

Why then, we must ask, have these ideas been so little understood, if even known, particularly among those to whom they are principally addressed—the philosophers? Indeed, why, when the name “Michael Polanyi” is mentioned among academics, particularly academic philosophers, is the response, more likely than not, “Michael Who?” Phil Mullins, in his symposium review of Harry Prosch’s introductory book on Polanyi, indicates that Prosch in 1986, nearly three decades after the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, lamented that “philosophers . . . have either ignored or discounted” the importance of Polanyi, leaving him to a few “sociologists, economists, psychologists, scientists, and theologians.”⁵ Now, a full five decades after *Personal Knowledge* appeared, the situation has not essentially changed. In an attempt to explain this, some have suggested that Polanyi’s philosophical writings are difficult to understand. I find merit in this explanation, but only in regard to those who have not been previously exposed to philosophy. I generally advise these people to make their first approach to Polanyi through any of the fine introductory secondary sources, of which there has been a rich provision during the past three decades—the first introduction to Polanyi’s thought appearing just a year after his death in 1976. Professor Mullins has supplied us with the first comparative and in-depth review of six of these excellent introductory works for the novitiate to choose among.

However, the most alarming lack of conversance, misunderstanding, and—often—resistance to Polanyi’s insights come not from those who are new to philosophy but from those who have made philosophy their profession. Here, I submit, we encounter the all-too-human reaction to the challenge of experiencing what Thomas Kuhn calls a “paradigm shift,” and what Polanyi refers to as a “breaking out.” The person who is confronted with the task of considering a “whole new way” of seeing or conceptualizing things

is inclined to evaluate the new paradigm, or set of concepts, through the lens of his or her previously held conceptual, or schematic, assumptions—which is precisely what is being questioned! What is instead required is a suspension of the old and an indwelling, as free as possible of the prior ordering principles, of the new. The very process of our mental development from infancy onward, Polanyi reminds us, requires “phases of self-destruction” in regard to old assumptions. Using as his model for mental development that process with which he was most intimately acquainted, scientific discovery, Polanyi suggests that “the construction of a framework” (whether the original one that the infant must construct, or the reconstruction of an already-formed, but inadequate, one)

must occasionally operate by demolishing a hitherto accepted structure, or parts of it, in order to establish an even more rigorous and comprehensive one in its place. Scientific discovery, which leads from one such framework to its successor, bursts the bounds of disciplined thought in an intense if transient moment of heuristic vision. And while it is thus breaking out, the mind is for the moment directly experiencing its content rather than controlling it by the use of any pre-established modes of interpretation⁶

This “breaking out” experience is not for the faint-hearted. And this is especially true when the paradigmatic change or conceptual revolution being called for is of the dimensions—as I have described Polanyi’s epistemology relative to that of the modernists and post-modernists—of a “Copernican revolution.” In his review of Drusilla Scott’s book, Mullins quotes the author to show how fully aware she was of the enormity of Polanyi’s challenge to conventional wisdom: “Polanyi is advocating such a U-turn in accepted ways of thinking that the experience of reading him can be disorienting.”⁷

Whatever criticisms we may be justified in making of modernity, we can be glad that we are inheritors of that part of its legacy that has freed us from censorship by autocratic and established institutions, whether secular or religious. Copernicus was not a beneficiary of

modernity. He could only share surreptitiously his tract, *Commentariolus* (1512), in which he was so bold as to challenge the centuries-old, indeed theologically doctrinalized, Ptolemaic and geocentric view of the universe. For fear of his life, he resisted for thirty-one years the public dissemination of his revolutionary, heliocentric thesis until finally a student persuaded him to publish this in his *De Revolutionibus*, in 1543. Conveniently for him, he died (of natural causes) on the day it was issued, although advocacy of heliocentrism was promptly forbidden by the Catholic Church, and again banned in 1632 when Galileo offered telescopic evidence to support heliocentrism.

By then, the emerging scientific community, for the most part (Tycho Brahe being a notable exception), had come to a private consensus on the merits of the heliocentric view. Still, as late as the end of the seventeenth century, Johannes Kepler's introduction to the Copernican system occurred only because his professor at Tübingen University, Michael Maestlin, selected him and a few other students from the rest, to confidentially share with them the Copernican view. With the rest of his students, Professor Maestlin, like his other colleagues, continued to teach the Ptolemaic system. The price Kepler would later pay for his enlightenment was excommunication by the authorities of his own Lutheran church, and the placing of a papal ban upon his teaching this view. However, Kepler lived long enough to benefit from the emerging pressures of modernity and its erosion of ecclesiastical authority sufficient to permit the publication of his heliocentric astronomy, *Epitome astronomiae Copernicanae*, in 1621—the first astronomy textbook based on the Copernican model.

More than a century would elapse between when Copernicus wrote his first tract challenging Ptolemaic geocentrism and when academicians could first share this revolutionary paradigm openly *with* their students!

Today in the Western world, we do not have to cope with the official censorship and suppression of intellectual expression that characterized much of the world prior to the full emergence of modernity. However, as John Stuart Mill warned us, unofficial

ensorship, the self-censorship of social conformity—which, indeed, Alexis de Tocqueville perceived as more prevalent and more destructive of free expression in American than in any other society that he knew—can be even more subtle and insidious, and more pervasive and universally stultifying, than any form of official (governmental or ecclesiastical) suppression. Only these considerations, it seems to me, enable us to approach an understanding of how professional and academic associations have been so successful—even in the midst of a society that is rightfully proud of its First Amendment protections and of its universities that laud the principle of academic freedom—in ignoring and resisting the most prophetic voices among them.

The Polanyi Society was founded in 1972—with the publication of its journal, *Tradition & Discovery*,⁸ starting about a year later—partly to encourage scholarship in Polanyian thought, but also to introduce to others what members considered an important and constructive correction to long-established perspectives that no longer served what Polanyi saw as humanity’s highest moral aspiration and purpose: namely, to open, broaden, and integrate our understanding and, thereby, to bring us into closer appreciation of, and oneness with, that which is transcendent and, not inappropriately, perceived as “holy.”

A number of intellectual associations that have formed around some of the kindred prophetic figures of the twentieth century, to which I’ve referred, appear to agree that progress in such a high endeavor has been—probably necessarily—slow. If the full century (indeed, more) that was required for the revolutionary views of Copernicus to finally be admitted to a fair and open hearing in academic discourse is to be taken as instructive, then we can take heart in the hope that, since the initial publication of Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* is now fifty years in the past, perhaps we have come almost halfway. Regardless, it is clear that the revolution initiated by Polanyi’s insights is still an unfinished one. Further, it is important to recall that Michael Polanyi was the first to recognize—indeed, he constantly insisted—that his post-critical philosophy, itself, must not be regarded as finished. He provided many hints, in

his writings and conversations, of how we might continue from where he left off. But, just as his epistemology was grounded in a willingness to trust one's own intimations, his personal relations with those whom he mentored were grounded in his fiducial assurance to them that they—in their own pioneering pursuits—would be guided by tacit intimations even beyond his own. Therefore, he urged all who entered into conversation with him to develop their thoughts still further by challenging his own conclusions, as well as by deepening their understanding of the implications of his insights through applying them.

Diane Yeager, Paul Lewis, and Tony Clark have taken the occasion of this symposium to do precisely that. Professor Yeager, recognizing that the examination of human judging (in contrast to what some have identified as other mental activities) has been largely neglected, has taken up the daunting task of remedying this neglect by considering judgment in the context of Polanyi's post-critical reflections. Similarly, Professor Lewis, concerned—as was Polanyi—with the processes of moral reasoning and the moral self, takes it a step further by exploring the pedagogical implications of these. Professor Clark then ventures to explore the implications of Polanyi's epistemology for Christian theology and worship, a task that Polanyi himself felt somewhat ill-equipped to pursue very far. I find that the reflections offered by the seven individuals who have converged for this symposium represent some of the most interesting and exciting work going on among Polanyian scholars—indeed, as exciting as the challenges that continue to emerge and confront us.

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NOTES

1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958; rev. ed. New York: Harper & Row/Torchbook, 1962.

2. Available for research in the Michael Polanyi Archive Collection at the University of Chicago Regenstein Library.

3. Initially staged at the National Theater, London, 2002.

4. Quoted in an excellent, and the only comprehensive, biography of Michael Polanyi: William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 208.

5. Harry Prosch, *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 6.

6. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 196.

7. Drusilla Scott, *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), ii.

8. Online copies of *Tradition & Discovery*, published three times a year, are available, along with other information about the Society and its activities at <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/>. To participate in an ongoing philosophical discussion, you are welcome to join the Polanyi Electronic Discussion List by going to http://groups.yahoo.com/group/polanyi_list/join.