

## Into the Tacit Dimension Reflections on Michael Polanyi's Personal Knowledge

by

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Michael Polanyi's philosophical system is based on an epistemology of discovery. In his view, "mental un-ease,"<sup>1</sup> the drive to "modify our intellectual existence, so as to become more satisfying to ourselves" (*PK*, p. 106), has literally brought the human mind into being: "For in the ontogenesis of the innovator we meet a step in the phylogenesis of the human mind" (*PK*, p. 396). Polanyi's system is also intensely descriptive. *Personal Knowledge* is not a book about philosophy; it is a book about experience, about the experience of thinking. Its persuasive logic lies in the subtlety and "rightness" of its descriptions of mental activities most of us have shared at some time. For anyone who has ever followed a "hunch," on whatever scale of importance, the following must ring true:

In the absence of any formal procedure on which the discoverer could rely, he is guided by his intimations of a hidden knowledge. He senses the proximity of something unknown and strives passionately towards it. Where great originality is at work in science or, even more clearly, in artistic creation, the innovating mind sets itself new standards more satisfying to itself, and modifies itself by the process of innovation so as to become more satisfying to itself in the light of these self-set standards. Yet all the time the creative mind is searching for something believed to be real; which, being real, will – when discovered – be entitled to claim universal validity. . . . (*PK*, pp. 395 f.)

I am not in a position to say whether this description of the process of discovery applies to all cases – whether the process is essentially the same wherever it is found. Indeed, I look around me at the scientific and technological innovations of the past few decades and I am loath to say much at all about how this flood of discovery is produced. What I will say is that I find these innovations increasingly uninteresting, however impressive technically, and this feeling explains my interest in Polanyi. Not that I am uninterested in discovery, but that I am interested in discovery of a certain kind. And I have a "hunch" that for discoveries of this kind Polanyi does supply a paradigm. But a paradigm is hardly enough, and what I find

alarming is that I do not see the paradigm being put to effective use. That is, the discoveries that are necessary are not being made.

One of the great descriptive achievements of *Personal Knowledge* is its clear demonstration that there is an unconscious mind in the human psyche which plays a far more visible, direct and positive role in our everyday lives than the dark subconscious of Freud. This is Polanyi's "tacit dimension," and he shows that its powers are at work, are in fact the prime movers, in virtually everything we do successfully. We acknowledge their importance when we say of a skill that in order to master it, one must be able to go through its operations "without thinking." We understand that in so doing, we release powers of speed, coordination and force which would be far beyond the capacities of deliberate effort. As Jacob Needleman has put it in a different context: "There may indeed exist an unconscious intelligence in man, but one which is not 'located,' so to say, where it has been sought."<sup>2</sup>

One is tantalized by Polanyi's vision of tacit powers functioning despite two centuries of effort to ignore, discount, and repress them. One cannot help wondering how much lies hidden in this "tacit dimension" that might be revealed by sympathetic investigation. Or more accurately, how much lies hidden around us that might be discovered using the powers of this dimension more sympathetically. Polanyi would no doubt argue that the repression of these powers has been far more painful and damaging to human beings than the much-touted Freudian sexual repression. Needleman has made this very case, in words which I believe Polanyi would find congenial. More damaging than sexual repression, he writes, has been "the suppression, the covering over of the organ of deep learning in man; the part of the mind that receives experiences and impressions and takes them in. This has been the far more serious repression in modern society. Deep in man, at the core of his being, there exists the need for experiences of truth. Around this need everything else in him is arranged like planets around the sun."<sup>3</sup>

Polanyi himself was intrigued by what might come of easing our culture's long-standing repression of tacit powers. Near the end of *Personal Knowledge*, he describes the book as an effort to "re-equip men with the faculties which centuries of critical thought have taught them to distrust. The reader has been invited to use these faculties and contemplate thus a picture of things restored to their fairly obvious nature. . . . For once men have been made to realize the crippling mutilations imposed by an objectivist framework — once the veil of ambiguities covering up these mutilations has been definitively dissolved — many fresh minds will turn to the task of reinterpreting the world as it is, and as it then once more will be seen to be" (*PK*, p. 381).

This quote stands at the beginning of the final chapter of *Personal Knowledge*. By this point, Polanyi's own "picture of things restored" is virtually complete. As if following his own invitation to "reinterpret the world" from this restored point of view, Polanyi in this last chapter begins to range far wider than before, cutting loose from the close tether to descriptions of experience on which he has moved throughout the book. The concept of a "generalized field," developed in this last chapter, I take

to be his own attempt to move beyond a description of tacit powers as they work, though unnoticed, in everyday life, and to inhabit that dimension first hand, measuring its powers and discovering its laws:

All the operations of the "tacit component" (whether self-centered or seeking universality, whether conscious or unconscious) will be subsumed under this field conception. All mental unease that seeks appeasement of itself will be regarded as a line of force in such a field. Just as mechanical forces are the gradients of a potential energy, so this field of force would also be a gradient of a potentiality: a gradient arising from the proximity of a possible achievement. (PK, p. 398)

I do not believe his effort is successful. I do not believe the field concept gets us any nearer a direct apprehension of tacit faculties than the descriptions which are "subsumed" under it. For those of us who follow Polanyi, however, this concept may have a significance entirely apart from its value as part of his theory. Its importance may be to indicate the radical nature of the direction in which we must go in discovering the laws of the tacit dimension. With this field concept, Polanyi tries to give tangible substance to what is generally considered an abstract quality. An "ordering principle" is turned into a "field of force" which directly generates a substance – energy – which might be subject to measurement and control.

There is a Pandora's box here, but one which I think should be opened. All sorts of popular fantasies of "higher energies," "cosmic consciousness," and "extra-sensory forces" are crowded into it. We may fear that once we take on the much-maligned Cartesian dualism in this way, when we allow "principles" and "purposes" to become higher energies and subtle bodies, then Mme. Blavatsky and the Eastern gurus are not far behind. But Polanyi has demonstrated with sober academic rigor that our own everyday experience gives evidence of the existence of this vast "tacit dimension," this higher unconscious, and it remains to us to discover how far it may extend.

There is another angle to the current popular preoccupation with higher consciousness and Eastern meditation. Polanyi understood very well the pain which human beings suffer from the "crippling mutilations" and cramping of the intellect and emotions which is produced by the "objectivist framework" which we have inherited. This pain is felt most acutely, I believe, among masses of people in our culture who have no historical perspective from which to identify its source. All over this country and indeed all over the world, people are sacrificing status, careers, and emotional and financial "security" in search of a larger world of thought and feeling to inhabit, a "world restored to its fairly obvious nature." Or on the other hand, they are viciously turning on one another in nihilistic rage that comes of hatred for the mental box one feels one can never escape. What we are seeing is, to paraphrase Polanyi, the awkward but determined efforts of a mass of people to "modify their intellectual existence, so as to become more satisfying to themselves," not "guided" but *driven* by "the proximity of something unknown."

In the midst of this situation, discovery is urgently needed, discovery of a fundamental kind. We must, as Polanyi began doing, revise our fundamental understanding of the natures of space, time, and energy, and of the relation of individual destiny to the life of the cosmos. Sadly, as I

began by saying, these discoveries are not being made. On the brighter side, however, with Polanyi's work and that of others, paradigms are beginning to emerge. It is now possible to imagine at least dimly what such a profound reorientation might look like, and how it might be begun. In the next few pages I would like to add a few observations as grist for the general mill.

In Polanyi's view, the dynamics of the act of discovery are very similar to the dynamics of the more common "act of comprehension" (*PK*, p. 398). In both cases, there is a kind of "eureka" response, a sense that something has jelled when the act is completed, and in both cases, before that completion, there is a vague sense of its approach which grows as discovery or as understanding comes nearer. A consideration of these dynamics is behind the "generalized field" concept, which both emphasizes the importance of the increasingly compelling sense of approach to understanding ("gradient of potentiality") and suggests that tangible energy is released at the moment of the coalescence of meaning. Following Polanyi's own lead as far as methodology is concerned, I would like to set before us descriptively a few instances of this coalescence of meaning which seem to me significant.

The act of discovery or comprehension, the critical moment when the pattern jells, is always distinguished by at least two qualities — first, it brings with it a burst of personal energy, and, second, it brings with it a sense of connection, either with another person or with some aspect of the world outside the individual. In their simplest form we see these principles operating between two people who are having "an interesting conversation." In this case there is rather a steady stream of energy and a distinct impression when the conversation is finished that the experience has been exceptionally satisfying and invigorating. This is reflected in such familiar statements as, "George and I had a wonderful talk last night. We really got what had been bothering us settled," or some such. As a rule, however, our conversation is much more hit or miss. In most cases the coalescence of meaning is more spotty and the bursts of energy it brings are slight but still distinctive. Consider, for example, trying to get directions to someone's house in a section of town with which you are partially familiar. You listen to the street descriptions, visualizing as best you can, concentrating and perhaps with brow knitted. There then comes a moment when you connect your knowledge of the vicinity with the description being given. Inevitably, you react, perhaps with "Oh, now I see. Yes, now I know exactly where you mean." There is that burst of energy, and there is the sense of connection, both between what you knew already and what you are being told and, secondarily, between you and the person giving directions.

Obviously, between people and among groups of people there is a wide range of complex variations on this experience of the coalescence of meaning. I will mention only one other, because it is important and because some years ago I ran across a perfect literary illustration for it. One of the most delicate and intense situations in which conversation of the quality I have been describing takes place is between lovers in an intimate situation. Literature is full of scenes of this kind. In modern

literature, especially, there is no shortage either of scenes in which substantial or high quality conversation has become impossible. Language has become dead – “shape without form, gesture without motion.” Not quite so common in literature are portrayals of the experience which falls between these two – the moments when the dead words come to life, the sudden snap of contact, the unexpected crumbling of a wall that seemed an absolute of nature. This experience is very well put in Yeats’s “A Memory of Youth,” as I read the poem. What is interesting here is the poem’s suggestion that the final coalescence of meaning involves the addition of something tangible and external to the words themselves, which had fallen flat, something of seeming alien and trivial character – dramatized by “a most ridiculous little bird.” The experience of the sudden communication and resulting closeness of the two lovers could not have occurred without their previous efforts, but Yeats makes it clear that the crucial event came from outside, or at least was triggered by something other than their efforts.

A Memory of Youth

The moments passed as at a play;  
 I had the wisdom love brings forth;  
 I had my share of mother-wit,  
 And yet for all that I could say,  
 And though I had her praise for it,  
 A cloud blown from the cut-throat North  
 Suddenly hid Love’s moon away.

Believing every word I said,  
 I praised her body and her mind  
 Till pride had made her eyes grow bright,  
 And pleasure made her cheeks grow red,  
 And vanity her footfall light,  
 Yet we, for all that praise, could find  
 Nothing but darkness overhead.

We sat as silent as a stone,  
 We knew, though she’d not said a word,  
 That even the best of love must die,  
 And had been savagely undone  
 Were it not that Love upon the cry  
 Of a most ridiculous little bird  
 Tore from the clouds his marvelous moon.

Yeats leaves the experience at that moment of contact, but anyone can complete the scenario. Based on our own experience, we know that something happens next. They embrace or kiss, but *something* has to happen. We know from our own experience that in situations of this kind there is always some kind of action, that is to say, energy is released.

The intimacy of the scene just described invites a short digression by contrast. Any intimate relationship must have a regular diet of this kind of substantial communication in order to stay healthy. What is not often recognized is that an office, an organization – any public arena, including a society as a whole – must also have this kind of diet in its public discourse if it is to remain healthy. Public dialogue of a high quality is of course very different in kind from intimate dialogue. But it is similar in that, when it is infused with this quality of coalescence of meaning, it produces the same two results – energy and connection. Thus, a mark of healthy public life is

a close relationship between dialogue and consequent action – the results of the energy released by the dialogue. Very few writers have discussed the vitality of public life in these terms. Polanyi to some extent, but more importantly Hanna Arendt. This is not the place to pursue that investigation, however.

Wherever it occurs, this coalescence of meaning is accompanied by one other effect which should be mentioned, a disturbance in the participant's sense of time. On the simplest level, this is a common experience. We engage in conversation which holds our interest, or in a task we find "absorbing," or listen to a lecture or speech which interests us, and afterwards we say, "My god, how did it get to be midnight? Where did the time go?" The language we commonly use here is significant: "absorbing," "engrossing," etc. These are terms which describe movement out of ourselves into something beyond us, with which we then come into close contact. They are terms which describe "connectedness" in an unusually intense form. So we see that the distortion of the sense of time here is a side effect, if you will, of the quality of connection which we have already noticed as a characteristic effect of the experience of the coalescence of meaning. This distortion is also a side effect on most occasions when "tacit powers" are exercised. When we are engaged in a skilled activity at which we are proficient, time seems to pass quickly. Indeed, this should not be surprising, since according to Polanyi these are, by definition, activities during which we are absorbed directly in the purpose of what we are doing (the meaning) and are more or less unconscious of the technical means by which that purpose is implemented. It may be that one reason we enjoy such activity is that it relieves the pressure of time somewhat. A kind of microsip of eternity.

The distortion of the sense of time may be experienced in a number of variations. The most obvious of course is boredom, "waste time stretching before and after," when the energy and connectedness of the coalescence of meaning are entirely absent. But the experience of "time flying" can be extrapolated in a positive direction to great extremes. The furthest of these are exceedingly rare and visionary. Short of that are experiences which are unusual but part of the experience of many people. Again, in the intensity of a powerful intimate exchange many people experience the sense of a radical distortion of time and place, radical enough to provoke a feeling of disorientation and such reactions as "Where am I? What's happening?"

Various degrees of the experience of *déjà vu* are in this same category, although they are not often thought to be related to intimate experiences. The connection again is in terms of the coalescence of meaning. I do not believe that experiences of *déjà vu*, or the similar sense of "I have dreamed what I see happening," occur arbitrarily. I believe that fleeting time-shift experiences of this kind are directly related to crucial moments and events in the development of an individual life, though these events may not be perceived as crucial at the moment. It is probably true of all individuals, though to a greater or lesser extent depending on the person, that there is a purpose to that life which must be discovered. It may be that there are a number of forms in which that purpose may be embodied, among which the individual may choose. But the purpose is there to be found and

followed. As the individual's consciousness of this purpose develops, slowly and over many years, as a rule, the very events of the person's life begin to coalesce in an energizing pattern of meaning. The consciousness of this purpose may be not as explicitly held, philosophical proposition which the person could state on demand. It is more in the nature of what Polanyi calls "tacit knowledge," a subliminal awareness of the harmonious unfolding of one's life in relation to one's surroundings. I believe that, as in other experiences of meaning, participation in this sense of purpose brings with it occasional shifts in the sense of time. Not arbitrarily occasional. Experiences of *dějã vu* and seeming dream fulfillment are of this kind and they occur at moments which form some kind of turning point or junction in the unfolding of the individual's relation to his own destiny. A moment of this kind may coincide with a major event such as a marriage but may also coincide with leaning down to pick up a dime off the sidewalk. I believe that marriage in its truest sense, incidentally, represents the intersection of two destinies at the properly appointed time, not an arbitrary decision on the part of two individuals acting randomly. Now this view of the nature of purpose in individual lives is not generally shared in our day. Most people muddle through their lives with very little sense of their own destiny. But the destiny is there all the same, and the individual cannot escape his relation to it, even if that relation is a muddle. Hence, there will be moments in any life in which the individual stumbles against the underlying pattern of his own life, and as he stumbles, his sense of time may swirl for a moment in the experience I have been discussing.

The most extreme cases of the sense of time shift make history and/or great literature. In these cases the individual's sense of his destiny is very strong, and his entire life's story has a heavy sense of "fatedness" about it. This is true of the tragic heroes of Shakespeare, for example. One of the most extreme cases in Western literature is that of Christ. As I understand the Gospels, Christ was conscious of his own destiny to such a vivid degree that time was transparent for him. He knew what was to happen in every important case far in advance. This is not to say that even in his case every event was predestined. Broadly speaking, I suspect that there are two kinds of choice which faced Christ as they face every human being. First, he could choose to discover and pursue his own destiny or not. If not, he would have had countless choices minute by minute but all of them would have had rather trivial implications. If he chose to pursue his own destiny, he would have had more momentous choices in how to approach it, and, as he got closer to a constant participation in that special pattern of events, would have begun to have (as he did) choices of tremendous weight and importance as to how to develop and put final shape and meaning on that destiny.

Several digressions have carried us very far afield, and it is time we retraced our steps a bit. My general purpose in this section is to describe instances of the "coalescence of meaning" from what I believe to be our common, shared experience. So far I have dealt primarily with meaningful conversation, but the experience of the coalescence of meaning can take other forms. Absorption in study versus grinding sleepily through meaningless pages is an example familiar to students. After grinding

sleepily for hours, you may come across a passage which suddenly "lights up" and makes sense, and the adrenalin begins to flow. Again the reaction is twofold — renewed energy and a sense of having made a connection. An experience illustrating the quality of "otherness" which attends this coalescence of meaning is familiar to musicians. You have plodded through a new piece for an hour, struggling with strange notes and intervals. Gradually the notes become familiar, until finally the conductor stops and says, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, you know the notes. Let's make *music*." This is something entirely different, something "other." You must concentrate; you must phrase carefully; you must watch the conductor and listen to everyone else's part. If everything goes well, the *music* does appear and the piece "takes on a life of its own," as is sometimes said.

I have discussed the experience of the coalescence of meaning in relation to its effect on time, on interpersonal "connectedness," psychic energy, and one's sense of individual destiny. I would like to conclude with a final literary example which will focus several of the points made already and add one final consideration — the importance and effects of meaningful configurations in physical space. The idea that physical space could have or be given distinctive qualities and energy characteristics, perhaps according to the natural or man-made arrays of material placed in it, was familiar in ancient times but has long been discredited. It was once thought, for example, that only certain locations were appropriate for temples or other sacred buildings. It is time, I believe, to have another look at this idea from a somewhat modernized perspective.

Several years ago I taught a semester of sophomore literature at a local university, using the venerable Norton anthology, Volume II. One selection has stuck in my mind as having importance beyond the obvious — Thomas Babington Macaulay's review of the *Colloquies* of Robert Southey. Industrialism is the issue. Southey is horrified by what he sees happening around him as a result of the growth of industry in the early 19th century. Macaulay is contemptuous of Southey's horror. The standoff, the total noncommunication between the two points of view, is as familiar as yesterday's paper — the "hardnosed" developer versus the "bleeding heart" environmentalist. Macaulay himself quotes the following from Southey, as the "only reason" Southey gives for his objections to the industrial state:

We remained a while in silence looking upon the assemblage of dwellings below. Here, and in the adjoining hamlet of Millbeck, the effects of manufactures and of agriculture may be seen and compared. The old cottages are such as the poet and the painter equally delight in beholding. Substantially built of the native stone without mortar, dirtied with no white lime, and their long low roofs covered with slate, as if they had been raised by the magic of some indigenous Amphion's music, the materials could not have adjusted themselves more beautifully in accord with the surrounding scene; and time has still further harmonized them with weather stains, lichens, and moss, short grasses, and short fern, and stoneplants of various kinds. . . . the garden beside, the beehives, and the orchard with its bank of daffodils and snowdrops, the earliest and the profusest in these parts, indicate in the owners some portion of ease and leisure, some regard to neatness and comfort, some sense of natural, and innocent, and healthful enjoyment. The new cottages of the manufacturers are upon the manufacturing pattern — naked, and in a row.



"How is it," said I, "that everything which is connected with manufactures presents such features of unqualified deformity? From the largest of Mammon's temples down to the poorest hovel in which his helotry are stalled, these edifices have all one character. Time will not mellow them; nature will neither clothe nor conceal them; they will remain always as offensive to the eye as to the mind.

At issue is the quality of Southey's evidence. Macaulay finds it beneath contempt: "It is not from bills of mortality and statistical tables that Mr. Southey has learned his political creed. He cannot stoop to study the history of the system which he abuses, to strike the balance between the good and evil which it has produced, to compare district with district, or generation with generation." Of the descriptive quotation given above, Macaulay observes: "Here is wisdom. Here are the principles on which nations are to be governed. Rosebushes and poor rates, rather than steam engines and independence. Mortality and cottages with weather stains, rather than health and long life with edifices which time cannot mellow."

In the century and a half since those words were written, Macaulay's confidence in the benefits of industrialism has proved naive. Some of Southey's criticisms have proved justified. But even such accommodation of the two points of view as has occurred has been achieved on the basis of factual evidence which Macaulay himself would have found acceptable — for example, the political fact of union organization and the statistical documentation of the human cost in injuries and sickness of unregulated industrial labor. Consider that the vanguard of industrial reform in the early 20th century consisted of Marxists who would have been as contemptuous of Southey's "sentimental estheticism" as Macaulay was.

Macaulay's attack on the nature and quality of Southey's evidence is thus as unanswered today as it was then. The real issue is epistemological. Just what kind of knowledge or information has Southey received and tried to communicate in his view of the cottages? Is there more substance here than a poet's nostalgia for quaint homes and pleasant scenery? Despite Macaulay's sarcasm, is there something to "rosebushes and cottages with weather stains" which *should* determine the "principles on which nations are to be governed?" My contention in this essay is that there is, and that the question of the nature of esthetic knowledge — for that is what is at issue — is of the greatest practical importance. I would like to propose an answer to the question "What did Southey see?" in the terms which have been developed earlier in this essay. What Southey observed were the tracings of energy — like the scars left by lightning or the vapor trails left by subatomic particles in a cloud chamber. The energy was esthetic, the result of coalescence of meaning which originated in the minds of the designers and formed a bridge, a "connection," to use the term we have used already, between the minds of the designers and the physical material with which they worked. An exchange of this kind occurs only, and so in this instance must have occurred, when the designers are working with such skill that their consciousness of the technique of what they are doing is subordinated to the purpose which they intuitively sense before them — the pattern, or coalescence of the elements of the design. That is to say, when they are exercising tacit powers and are in touch with that higher dimension of the "unconscious" which Polanyi calls the "tacit dimension."

The peculiar attractiveness of the resulting physical configuration, its esthetic appeal, is the direct trace of that coalescence of meaning and movement of energy. And at this point I will suggest that all such coalescence is esthetic in nature, including such unlikely instances as moments of "good conversation" mentioned earlier. (From this point of view, you might say quite literally that such moments are musical, that is, instances of the coalescence of meaning in sound.) In the case of the cottages, I would also add the suggestion that as a result of the rich exchange of energy between mind and matter, extended over a long duration of time, the quality of the space surrounding the cottages was gradually changed — perhaps even some of that energy stored in the pattern or trace left there. So that the resulting quality of space became not simply "attractive" to look at, but life-supporting in a direct way.

This last observation brings me to the concluding point of this essay, having to do with the possible practical importance of the interpretation I have offered of Macaulay and Southey's argument. If it is by means of the exchange of esthetic energy that the individual establishes contact with other human beings and with the material world, then this "energy of meaning" may be as tangibly essential to the maintenance of human life as air and water. And if the movement of this energy among physical objects in space can actually affect the quality of the space itself, then esthetic decisions regarding the design and layout of homes, buildings, and cities may have far more tangible effects than has been thought hitherto. There may be more involved in choices of building placement and design than function, convenience, or "prettiness." It may be a matter of health.

These are of course the wildest of speculations at this point, but one thing is certain, that working dynamics of the "tacit dimension," if they are ever set out, *will* appear wildly astonishing. One of the most heartening, even thrilling propositions implied throughout Polanyi's work is that if we would just look at our own experience with a clear eye, we would be astonished on the spot. Not least astonishing of what is held out to us is the proposition that we would find in that experience a reflection of one of our noblest desires — the passion for coherence and meaning. By a circuitous route we are here brought back to Needleman's simple assertion quoted near the outset of this essay: "Deep in man, at the core of his being, there exists the need for the experience of truth. Around this need everything else in him is arranged like planets around the sun." There, I think Polanyi would have agreed, we have a vivid and simple "picture of the world the way it is." And now we must move into that world.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 398. Hereafter, all references to this work are cited parenthetically as *PK*.

<sup>2</sup>Jacob Needleman, *Lost Christianity* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 118.

<sup>3</sup>Needleman, pp. 60f.