

Polanyi and Rhetoric

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Polanyi's rhetoric was a disaster. I do not mean his understanding of what is involved in trying to persuade. I think he had rather sound views of this. I mean his use of rhetoric.

Good rhetoric must surely require, first of all, that one secure the attention of the people to whom one wishes to communicate. Now Michael Polanyi indeed sought to do this by starting his writings with a paradox or a problem or a statement meant to engross or puzzle or startle his readers. The difficulty was that, although he wished very much to capture the interest of philosophers (inasmuch as he hoped to turn philosophic thought around to a point of view he felt our modern world was very much in need of), the sort of problems or paradoxes with which he began his writings were not the sort that were of great interest to most contemporary philosophers.

To start right off questioning the pure objectivity of science and asserting that its true objectivity comes from the way in which it satisfies our desires for intellectual beauty and establishes greater contacts with reality was, as he himself said at the beginning of *Personal Knowledge*, to have one's account "shrugged aside as out-dated Platonism."¹ Nevertheless this was the way he started *Personal Knowledge*² and he went right on from there working out what "probability" must mean on this basis, and "order," and then ending the first part of his book by showing "science" to be simply a matter of "skills" — after which he immediately³ dropped a bomb-shell: an assertion that all explicit knowledge rested on a tacit foundation, from whence he moved to "intellectual passions" (of all things!) and then to "conviviality."

In 1958 you could not have picked a better way to lose your philosophic audience.

Analytic philosophers dominated the English and American scene and were still striving mightily to find the purely explicit logical basis for all science, including scientific *inquiry* also, of course. Problems relevant to these efforts were what warmed the cockles of their hearts. To be offered the problem of how we might understand science as resting on tacit

grounds, rather than explicit, and as satisfying intellectual passions and establishing conviviality could only leave these analysts at best bored and at worst disgusted. (Some reviewers called him an obscurantist.)

On the Continent Marxists were strong and, of course, would find nothing intriguing about his edifying and personally subjective approach, since it would seem to them to deal with the problem of science in an Utopian way, devoid of any historically economic context. Besides he made it perfectly clear very early in his works that Marxists were almost the foremost offenders of intellectual decency.

Phenomenologists were also prominent on the Continent and although they could find his attack on the pure objectivity of science of interest, their interest would not in general be sustained beyond the point where they discovered Polanyi's confession of his own belief in science and in its governing traditions – a point which he always hastened to make in his writings in order to make sure that his audience did not make the mistake of thinking that his attack on the ideal of explicit objectivity in science was an attack on science itself.⁴ The phenomenologists would mostly have preferred it to be an attack on science itself!

American pragmatists, it is true, could be somewhat attracted to his work by his opening shots, since these remarks could be seen by them to be attacks on the spectator theory of knowledge. And Polanyi did have more followers in America than he had elsewhere. However, the notion of a "pure" science establishing its own standards, *sui generis*, uncontaminated by social interests or purposes (observable between the lines in *Personal Knowledge* and clearly seen in the opening of his *The Logic of Liberty*⁵) could only leave them flat. To them his views of a "pure" science would smack of the nineteenth century. But anyhow there were not too many academic pragmatists left on the American scene by that time.

Polanyi seemed to descend upon us with his message like a prophet of old. He started forthwith beating the philosophers of his day over their heads, especially the analytic philosophers, all of whom he treated as really positivists.

What Polanyi perceived about *most* of the philosophers of his day was, I believe, true. They were enamored with the notion of explicit objectivity. Such villification could only make enemies of the audience he wished to persuade – a very bad rhetorical beginning.

What rhetorical tactics then should he have used? The answer seems simple. He should have started with the problems which contemporary philosophers were taking seriously and have waded with them through the ins and outs of their various attempted resolutions patiently showing how, *in their own terms*, these resolutions did not resolve what he should have called *our* problems and finally, as if in desperation, have cautiously suggested some resolutions which involved (but only *tacitly*) some tacit components. Only when (or if) they had come to some sort of reluctant acceptance of some resolutions of their own pressing problems which did involve some tacit components might he finally have shown to them that (by George!) we (including them) were actually making use of some tacit components and that we seemed to be doing some serious damage to the ideal of knowledge as fully explicit objectivity; but that it was apparently

warranted damage.

It is surely not rhetorically wise to attack, as Polanyi did, what the members of one's audience hold sacred. It would be more effective to gradually weaken their belief in their shibboleths by artfully seducing them (if possible) into solutions which do, in fact, entail other principles and which may have, however, only been used subsidiarily and tacitly in the formation of these solutions.

The irony of the whole situation was that Polanyi knew that this was the way in which our "paradigms" shifted – or, as he preferred to say it, the way in which we gradually became existentially different persons through our adopting resolutions of our problems which appealed to us because they seemed to make sense. Only later, he thought, were we able to see focally that we had been tactily using new principles in these resolutions which we had never deliberately adopted, but which we now found we were dwelling in, and which therefore had become part of us.⁶

Not unconnected with this notion was Polanyi's idea of "conversion." He thought that the only way we could persuade others to change their *basic* commitments (because there were no explicit proofs available for any basic commitments) was to show people glimpses of desirable possibilities opened up by a new way of operating which would remain unachievable if they stuck to their old methods and principles.⁷

Polanyi in fact, however, seldom practiced either one of these sound rhetorical tactics of which he seemed to be quite aware. He therefore grated upon, annoyed, and offended the philosophers of his day – or else he simply bored them. I think it is true that he was in fact speaking to problems which modern man truly has. And this was why there were so many perceptive people who found, and still do find, that what he was doing was tremendously valuable. But such people were mostly not academic philosophers. They were largely people in other fields who relished his attack on the academic philosophers of his time, because they also found that what these philosophers were doing was largely irrelevant to the intellectual difficulties of man in our day – and also to problems in their own fields. He was to them an iconoclastic breath of fresh air. Polanyi, of course, welcomed support from any quarter and did little to quarrel with any of these people about the exact meaning of what he was saying, even when they were obviously oversimplifying it to a painful degree. However, he remained until his death profoundly disappointed that he had moved so few philosophers. He *had* moved some, of course, but they were for the most part those who found the general trend of contemporary philosophers uncongenial – often because they felt that the older, "classic" philosophers were ever so much more sound.⁸

Polanyi, however, managed even to alienate (or at least offend) many of these philosophers too – viz., those who regarded the older philosophers as superior to the contemporary. His attitude was that *all* philosophers, from Plato on, were seeking unqualified explicit objectivity as the ideal of knowledge and that *no* one before him had even caught a glimpse of the tacit dimensions which lay at the root of all knowledge. He did not, it would appear, know these "classic" philosophers as well as many other academic philosophers knew them and he consequently said many things

about them which those who knew them found inaccurate and misleading. So their admiration and respect for Polanyi were somewhat dampened or, in many cases, extinguished.

Carl J. Friedrich's review of *Personal Knowledge* when it first came out is very instructive with respect to this point.⁹ Professor Friedrich showed a rather clear and sympathetic understanding of what Polanyi was about in *Personal Knowledge*, so much so that his review shows us the essential structure of the book – why Polanyi discusses what where he does and what the parts are doing *vis-a-vis* the whole. Many people who like Polanyi very much have had some trouble seeing this! He had one real criticism of Polanyi, however. He thought it was sad that Polanyi did not seem to know the extent to which what he was saying was akin to what other great philosophers had said, such as in particular Kant and Hegel and Whitehead – in fact, that they had already said some of the very things Polanyi was saying. Instead Polanyi seemed to think these philosophers were irreconcilable opponents of his view who needed to be set straight. Rhetorically therefore Polanyi failed also with most of the philosophers who might have been his neutral allies.

Let us now ask why Polanyi committed these rhetorical blunders (which he should have known were blunders) and thus made the acceptance by his fellow philosophers of his quite astute and timely philosophic work such an uphill battle.

I think the explanation is not hard to find. It lies in his ignorance. Polanyi was a man of very considerable intellectual ability and sensitivity – as well as knowledge. Reading what he wrote, one is amazed at his capacity to understand almost anything and, indeed, to go directly to the heart of so many different fields and issues. He was extremely well-read in many different areas of human thought and concern and, indeed, I think could justly be said to have been a genius. However, he was a victim of that kind of ignorance which can never be remedied by books or even by thought, and which he himself knew to be irremediable by these means. He showed how in the sciences, and *mutatis mutandis* in other scholarly fields as well, there could be no substitute for that *tacit* understanding of the field which is “picked up” by exposure to the community of scholars in that field, and particularly from the masters in that field and is thereafter simply dwelt in in a way subsidiary to focal problems. These absorbed understandings create a tacit feeling for what is regarded by the relevant community of scholars as appropriate and plausible in that particular area of study which can be acquired, he held, in no other way.¹⁰ The dire effects of the lack of this necessary aspect of knowledge of the field of “Philosophy” is, I believe, excruciatingly clear in Polanyi's case. Polanyi had never achieved his knowledge of philosophy in and among other philosophers in the academic community of philosophers. He served his “apprenticeship” in physical chemistry. He had not learned from a learning association with philosophers how they tacitly understood the “classic” philosophers. He also had not learned in the same way how contemporary philosophers tacitly found and saw and tackled their particular problems. He therefore looked as amateurish and wrong-headed to the philosophic community as someone who might come into physical chemistry from the

outside (simply from his own reading and thought, without having learned his chemistry in the community of chemists) would have looked to Polanyi – or to any one else in the community of physical chemists.

Polanyi worked out, by the sheer genius of his own effort, without help from other philosophers, what the truly significant philosophic problems were for modern man. In the same way he also worked out a new epistemology sufficient to resolve them – also without help from the philosophic community. (One might say, “without contamination from the philosophic community,” if one thought, as many of us do, that Polanyi might have been unable to see things so clearly and to develop such a fresh approach had he been a product of the philosophic community of his day.) He then sprang this new insight on the world – including the philosophers – as a great discovery, a breakthrough, which would perhaps have the effect of another Copernican revolution.

The rhetoric of his efforts was, as we have seen, faulty. Nobody listened. Nobody he had hoped would listen, that is, because he was not dwelling in the subsidiary clues in which his intended audience was dwelling.

Even if he could have then recognized his mistake and have patiently started serving a kind of apprenticeship with his contemporary philosophers, learning to dwell in their tacit understandings and so to speak their language, working long and hard in and through the problems they took seriously (somewhat as the philosophers returning to the cave in Plato's parable would work with those down there in their contentions about the meanings of the shadows on the wall), it would probably not have been successful. The jig was up. The cat was out of the bag. Everyone probably would have guessed what he was really after and that he really was not serious about *their* problems. Once having exploded his big bomb without having first softened up their defenses, exploding littler ones now would simply look absurd.

What I am saying is that, although Polanyi did not proceed in a rhetorically sound way, there was perhaps not really any other way he could have proceeded, being the person he was when and where he was and with the background he had – i.e., possessing what he termed his own “calling.”¹⁰

He was well aware of how such situations as these worked in the community of scientists. The state of general beliefs among members of a certain kind of scientist (say physical chemists) at any one time set limits upon what could be accepted as good research and sound discovery. Normally these were not felt as restrictions, however, since all members of the community had become acculturated to these convictions and standards and so they all dwelt in them personally. This was how Polanyi understood that the “republic of science” was able to remain free and autonomous.¹²

It might indeed be that some truly sound research or theories would not be regarded in this community as sound and so would not get a hearing or would be roundly rejected if they did. But, by and large, Polanyi held the amount of nonsense and unassimilable, “goofy” ideas screened out by these means would more than offset the number of sound ones thus aborted.¹³ Anyhow, a *free* community of scholars *could* not work any

other way. So there was in fact no alternative.¹⁴

He admitted that sometimes ignorance of certain communally accepted limits on the part of a researcher *could* result in a discovery of real worth which could not have been made had the researcher known what was generally believed to be sound by the scientists in that field. He reported that the isolation of his mentors at the University of Budapest from the prevailing vogue of explanations or certain chemical phenomena (because of the disruptions in communication caused by the first World War) enabled him to get his Ph.D. by developing some theoretic explanations which were in fact totally unacceptable to the community of physical chemists at that time. Einstein himself opposed his theory when he heard of it and others followed him. Polanyi thought he narrowly escaped with his career. For twenty years thereafter he could not even teach his own theory in his own courses, since his students would have failed their general examinations had they come out with this theory on their exams. Yet he, himself, continued to believe it was sound and that the experimental evidence supported it. Finally the fashion for the kind of explanations of such phenomena changed and his work came to be accepted.¹⁵

Ignorance of principles currently held by a community of scholars *can* sometimes therefore, be beneficial, if indeed what comes out is in fact a sound discovery even though the community of those scholars currently believes it to be unsound.

Of course the community will not be able to accept these new (really sound) discoveries and thus the new discovery will be suppressed or ignored. How then can a new insight which strikes at the heart of what is currently believed to be true ever become accepted? Generalizing from what we have said: (1) its discoverer must recognize that it is not currently acceptable to one's colleagues and then (2) he must develop the strategy we mentioned earlier of drawing the community gradually into the *tacit* use of these new principles or theories before he gives them explicit formulation.

If this cannot be done for any particular reason, as, of course, it could not be in Polanyi's case, there is yet another strategy open (to one in philosophy at least) and one which Polanyi seemingly followed, although perhaps inadvertently, and that is to appeal to dissatisfied people in other fields by showing them what can be done with these new principles about the problems in their own fields, the conventional solutions to which do not satisfy them. One can hope that in time philosophers will see that these new principles (which are really philosophic) are being used in significant ways in many other fields and they may be forced to take some account of them in philosophy itself. This has indeed sometimes happened in the history of philosophy. Medieval scholasticism finally perished, possibly, in this indirect way.

Polanyi may have been driven toward the end of his life to pin his hopes on this latter strategy; but probably he did not choose it first deliberately. He may simply have found the beginning stages of it happening and saw what could possibly ensue from it.

Let me sum up by observing that striking frontally at the ideal of explicit

objectivity among the philosophers of his day – even perhaps still of ours – would be comparable to striking frontally at naturalism as one of the principles of explanation among scientists. Polanyi would never have dreamed of attacking naturalism head-on. Of course he himself believed it to be sound, so he would not have done so for this reason.¹⁶ But, even if he had thought it was unsound, he would have known tacitly, *because he was a scientist*, how impossible it would have been to openly attack it. However, because *he was not a philosopher* “by trade,” he only saw explicit objectivism *from the outside* as the wrong and debilitating force which I believe it really was, and is, and also that most (if not all) current philosophers held it – even sometimes when they claimed not to. He somehow thought he could simply argue (or browbeat?) them out of it. Had he been a member of their community he, *himself*, would have approached its abandonment gingerly, and indeed, almost aghast at his own timidity and would have stood in greater awe than he did of the enormity of his task. This, I believe, would have led him almost intuitively to have attacked it in the way in which I have claimed above (and which he himself, I think, also claims) would have been rhetorically sound. Of course, he might not have had the patience – or the duplicity – to have done so. A number of us in Philosophy have not. The use of proper rhetoric, like everything else, is not without its price, and some of us have chosen not to pay that price. We have not measured out our life in tilting with what we believe to be shadows in the hope that we might – someday – convince our fellow combatants that they have only been jousting with shadows. Life has seemed too short and precious to waste on such empty efforts. Should we play games and run chances of missing the truth? Yet we ought never suppose that we can get off scot-free by ignoring rhetoric. That, too, has a price.

We should not forget, however, that Polanyi may not have had a choice. He pointed out that apprentices can only learn from their masters if they respect them enough to emulate them.¹⁷ If this is true, as I suspect it is, *could* Polanyi have apprenticed himself to the philosophers of his day?

ENDNOTES

- ¹Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 6.
- ²*Ibid.*, Part I. See also Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946), Part I.
- ³*Personal Knowledge*, Part II.
- ⁴Michael Polanyi, "Science and Man's Place in the Universe," *Science as a Cultural Force*, ed. Harry Wolfe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), pp. 54-76. Michael Polanyi, "Logic and Psychology," *American Psychologist*, 23 (January 1968), 27. And *Personal Knowledge*, p. 375.
- ⁵Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 3-7.
- ⁶Michael Polanyi, "The Creative Imagination," *Chemical and Engineering News*, 44 (April 25, 1966), p. 92. "Logic and Psychology," pp. 33-34. Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 31-33.
- ⁷*Science, Faith and Society*, pp. 67, 81-82. *Personal Knowledge*, p. 151.
- ⁸Harry Prosch, "Polanyi's Tacit Knowing in the 'Classic' Philosophers," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 4 (October 1973), 201-16.
- ⁹Carl J. Friedrich, "A Review of *Personal Knowledge*," *Natural Law Forum*, 8 (1962), 132-48.
- ¹⁰*The Logic of Liberty*, pp. 26, 57. *Science, Faith and Society*, pp. 43-46. *Personal Knowledge*, p. 53.
- ¹¹*Personal Knowledge*, pp. 65, 321-22, 334, 346. *The Study of Man*, p. 36.
- ¹²*The Logic of Liberty*, pp. 53-54. *Science, Faith and Society*, pp. 63-65. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 63-65.
- ¹³Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 53, 57.
- ¹⁴*The Logic of Liberty*, pp. 40, 57, 67.
- ¹⁵*Knowing and Being*, pp. 87-96.
- ¹⁶*Science, Faith and Society*, pp. 25-26. *Personal Knowledge*, p. 292.
- ¹⁷*The Study of Man*, pp. 94-98. *Personal Knowledge*, p. 207.