

Excerpts from Polanyi on Being Post-Critical

1. The first *published* mention of “post-critical” occurs with little explanation in Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 109. In reference to widespread disillusionment with modern totalitarianism among European intellectuals in the 1940s, Polanyi writes: “The critical enterprise which gave rise to the Renaissance and the Reformation, and started the rise of our science, philosophy, and art, had matured to its conclusion and had reached its final limits. We have thus begun to live in a new intellectual period, which I would call the *post-critical* age of Western civilization [my emphasis]. Liberalism to-day is becoming conscious of its own fiduciary foundations and is forming an alliance with other beliefs, kindred to its own.”
2. In his Series I Sixth Gifford Lecture, titled “Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy,” Polanyi says, in a note *reminiscent* of his comments in *The Logic of Liberty* and later in *Personal Knowledge*: “Finding nothing more to feed on, the critical movement has exhausted its creative functions and has begun to destroy its own foundations. The task of a *post-critical* philosophy [my emphasis] is to rescue our minds from this peril. I shall urge that it can attempt this only by assuming a frankly fiduciary character.”(101) Quoted in an email from Phil Mullins, 5/2/14.
3. From: Phil Mullins, “The ‘Post-Critical’ Symbol and the ‘Post-Critical’ Elements of Polanyi’s Thought,” *Polanyiana* 10:1-2, 77ff, p. 6: “On November 30, 1958, just after the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi gave a lecture in Austin, Texas, titled ‘The Outlook of Science: Its Sickness and Cure.’ He makes, in this little known lecture, one of his very few direct comments on the subtitle of *Personal Knowledge*:
I have given to the book called *Personal Knowledge*, on which this lecture is based, the subtitle “Towards a Post-critical Philosophy.” This was meant to say that in my view the great intellectual revolution which is marked by the names of Descartes, Hume, Kant, J. S. Mill, and Bertrand Russell, is nearing its final limits. This movement was guided by the principle that doubt is the solvent of error which leaves behind truth (33-11).
This comment suggests that the term “post-critical” served as a vehicle or symbol that gathered up both the major themes in Polanyi’s criticisms of modern thought and the major constructive philosophical alternatives [to modern critical thought] in Polanyi’s vision.”
4. *PK*, Preface, p. xiiiif: “I start by rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment. In the exact sciences, this false ideal is perhaps harmless, for it is in fact disregarded there by scientists. But we shall see that it exercises a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science. I want to establish an alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally. Hence the wide scope of this book and hence also the coining of the new term I have used for my title: Personal Knowledge. The two words may seem to contradict each other: for true knowledge is deemed impersonal, universally established, objective. But the seeming contradiction is resolved by modifying the conception of knowing. . . . Such is the *personal participation* of the knower in all acts of understanding. But this does not make our understanding *subjective*. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act

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claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality, a contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications. It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge. . . . Throughout this book I have tried to make this situation apparent. I have shown that into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge.”

5. In *Personal Knowledge*, 105f, Polanyi writes: “For to modify our idiom [as in heuristically shifting from one interpretative framework to another] is to modify the frame of reference within which we shall henceforth interpret our experience; it is to modify ourselves. . . . [I]t entails a conversion to new premises not accessible by any strict argument from those previously held. It is a decision, originating in our own personal judgment, to modify the premises of our judgment, and thus to modify our intellectual existence, so as to become more satisfying to ourselves.”
6. *PK 267*: “This then is our liberation from objectivism: to realize that we can voice our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions—from within the whole system of acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own, prior to the holding of any particular piece of knowledge. If an ultimate logical level is to be attained and made explicit, this must be a declaration of my personal beliefs. I believe that the function of philosophic reflection consists in bringing to light, and affirming as my own, the beliefs implied in such of my thoughts and practices as I believe to be valid; that I must aim at discovering what I truly believe in and at formulating the convictions which I find myself holding; that I must conquer my self-doubt, so as to retain a firm hold on this programme of self-identification.
7. *PK 267*: “Our mind lives in action, and any attempt to specify its presuppositions produces a set of axioms which cannot tell us why we should accept them. Science exists only to the extent to which there lives a passion for its beauty, a beauty believed to be universal and eternal.”
8. *PK 267*: In reference to a Latin quote from St. Augustine, “He [St. Augustine] seems to acknowledge that you cannot expose an error by interpreting it from the premises which lead to it, but only from premises which are believed to be true. His maxim *nisi credideritis non intelligitis* expresses this logical requirement. It says, as I understand it, that the process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic, and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in the light of which we approach it; a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis. Our fundamental beliefs are continuously reconsidered in the course of such a process, but only within the scope of their own basic premises.”
9. *PK 268*: “This [apparent] invitation to dogmatism may appear shocking; yet it is but the corollary to the greatly increased critical powers of man. These have endowed our mind with a capacity for self-transcendence of which we can never again divest ourselves. We have plucked from the Tree a second apple which has forever imperilled our knowledge of Good

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and Evil, and we must learn to know these qualities henceforth in the blinding light of our new analytical powers. Humanity has been deprived a second time of its innocence, and driven out of another garden which was, at any rate, a Fool's Paradise. Innocently, we had trusted that we could be relieved of all personal responsibility for our beliefs by objective criteria of validity—and our own critical powers have shattered this hope. Struck by our sudden nakedness, we may try to brazen it out by flaunting it in a profession of nihilism. But modern man's immorality is unstable. Presently his moral passions reassert themselves in objectivist disguise and the scientific Minotaur is born. The alternative to this, which I am seeking to establish here, is to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs. We should be able to profess now knowingly and openly those beliefs which could be tacitly taken for granted in the days before modern philosophic criticism reached its present incisiveness. Such powers may appear dangerous. But a dogmatic orthodoxy can be kept in check both internally and externally, while a creed inverted into a science is both blind and deceptive."

- 10.** *PK 269*: "It has been taken for granted throughout the critical period of philosophy that the acceptance of unproven beliefs was the broad road to darkness, while truth was approached by the straight and narrow path of doubt. We were warned that a host of unproven beliefs were instilled in us from earliest childhood. That religious dogma, the authority of the ancients, the teaching of the schools, the maxims of the nursery, all were united to a body of tradition which we tended to adopt merely because these beliefs had been previously held by others, who wanted us to embrace them in our turn. We were urged to resist the pressure of this traditional indoctrination by pitting against it the principle of philosophic doubt. Descartes had declared that universal doubt should purge his mind of all opinions held merely on trust and open it to knowledge firmly grounded in reason. In its stricter formulations the principle of doubt forbids us altogether to indulge in any desire to believe and demands that we should keep our minds empty, rather than allow any but irrefutable beliefs to take possession of them. Kant said that in mathematics there was no room for mere opinion, but only for real knowledge, and that short of possessing knowledge we must refrain here from all judgment. The method of doubt is a logical corollary of objectivism. It trusts that the uprooting of all voluntary components of belief will leave behind unassailed the residue that is completely determined by the objective evidence. Critical thought trusted this method unconditionally for avoiding error and establishing truth." "I do not say that during the period of critical thought this method has been always, or indeed ever, rigorously practised—which I believe to be impossible—but merely that its practice has been avowed and emphatic, while its relaxation was marginal and acknowledged only in passing."
- 11.** *PK 271*: "It remains deeply ingrained in the modern mind—as I find even in my own mind—that though doubt may become nihilistic and imperil thereby all freedom of thought, to refrain from belief is always an act of intellectual probity as compared with the resolve to hold a belief which we could abandon if we decided to do so. To accept a belief by yielding to a voluntary impulse, be it my own or that of others placed in a position of authority, is felt to be a surrender of reason. You cannot teach the necessity for doing this without incurring—even in your own heart—the suspicion of obscurantism. At every step in quest of a post-critical philosophy the warning of the critical age will echo in our minds. In the words of Kant: 'Reason must in all its undertakings subject itself to criticism; should it limit

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freedom of criticism by any prohibitions, it must harm itself, drawing upon itself a damaging suspicion. Nothing is so important through its usefulness, nothing so sacred, that it may be exempted from this searching examination, which knows no respect for persons. Reason depends on this freedom for its very existence.’ I shall not feel reassured in advocating an attitude of a-critical belief, unless I have first fully met this warning by a critical examination of the principle of doubt [which, of course, Polanyi claims to do in *PK*].”

12. *PK* 279: “The belief in the efficacy of doubt as a solvent of error was sustained primarily—from Hume to Russell—by skepticism about religious dogma and the dislike of religious bigotry. This has been the dominant passion of critical thought for centuries, in the course of which it has completely transformed man’s outlook on the universe. It must, accordingly, form the main subject of my critique of doubt.”
13. *PK* 297: “Thus the programme of comprehensive doubt collapses and reveals by its failure the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality.” 298: “It should also have become clear by this time that the beliefs transmitted by this now imperiled tradition [of modern critical rationality] are by no means self-evident. Modern fanaticism is rooted in an extreme skepticism which can only be strengthened, not shaken, by further doses of universal doubt.”
14. *PK* 354: “Of course, the scientific study of a subject matter may justifiably destroy our interest in it if it proves that the matter is in fact illusory. . . . Instead, we meet with the typical device of modern intellectual prevarication, first systemized by Kant in his regulative principles. Knowledge that we hold to be true and also vital to us, is made light of, because we cannot account for its acceptance in terms of a critical philosophy [such as Kant’s]. We then feel entitled to continue using that knowledge, even while flattering our sense of intellectual superiority by disparaging it. . . . If consistently carried out, the denial of contemplative value in science would cut off biology from the intellectual passions from which it takes its origin, and could not stop short of denying altogether scientific reality to the beings in which life manifests itself.”
15. *PK* 365f: “When I gave this book [*Personal Knowledge*] the sub-title ‘Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy’ I had this turning point [coming to “accredit our own judgment as the paramount arbiter of all our intellectual performances, and claiming that we are competent to pursue intellectual excellence as a token of a hidden reality”] in 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. Modern man is unprecedented; yet we must now go back to St. Augustine to restore the balance of our cognitive powers. In the fourth century A.D., St. Augustine brought the history of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating for the first time a post-critical philosophy. He taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*. His doctrine ruled the minds of Christian scholars for a thousand years. Then faith declined and demonstrable knowledge gained

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superiority over it. . . . Here lies the break by which the critical mind repudiated one of its two cognitive faculties and tried completely to rely on the remainder. Belief was so thoroughly discredited that, apart from specially privileged opportunities, such as may be still granted to the holding and profession of religious beliefs, modern man lost his capacity to accept any explicit statement as his own belief. All belief was reduced to the status of subjectivity: to that of an imperfection by which knowledge fell short of universality. . . . We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.”

- 16.** *PK* 381: “This book [i.e., *PK*] tries 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. This is all the book was meant to do.”