Wittgenstein and Polanyi: Metaphysics Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT Key words: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michael Polanyi, Plato, essence, joint comprehension, epistemology, metaphysics, meaning.
This paper looks at Wittgenstein's criticism of metaphysical philosophy and its possible reconstitution through Polanyi's epistemology of tacit knowing. The two approaches are contrasted in the end in response to the question "What is the meaning of life?"

What I plan to do here is to address the question of the possibility of there being sense to metaphysical philosophy. There is one key point upon which any metaphysical edifice turns: the notion of essence. If this notion is destroyed, then no metaphysics can stand. If it can be sustained in some manner, then the possibility of metaphysics remains.

Essence appears to be the base level for developing standards of judgment that stand apart from us. Once we name essences, we can arrange them in propositions to describe states of affairs, and further, we can arrange our propositions into general philosophical pictures. Undermining essences will undermine the push towards unity at each of these levels.

The beauty of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work is that it displays elegantly the collapse of metaphysical philosophy through a sustained attack on the notion of essence. The beauty of Michael Polanyi's epistemology is that it can show the seductive power of traditional conceptions of essence as it provides a new understanding of what essence might amount to.

I will first display the strategy Wittgenstein employs in criticizing metaphysical philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigations*[1]; I will discuss briefly Polanyi's conception of "tacit knowledge"; I will then exhibit how Polanyi not only counters the move Wittgenstein makes in order to reformulate a notion of "essence," but shows why Wittgenstein's criticisms work so well in the first place.

Wittgenstein's Attack on Metaphysical Philosophy

The explicit targets of Wittgenstein's attack are Plato, Augustine, Frege, Russell, and his earlier self. It is helpful here, however, to blanch out some of the subtler distinctions and more specific critiques[2] for a general sense of the metaphysical view Wittgenstein undermines: the Platonic picture which sets the ground for a "correspondence" conception of truth.[3]

As sophisticated as the theories and counter-theories of various philosophers became, Classical or Modern, they relied on a conception of truth that Wittgenstein reads back into the dialogues of Plato and leads, ultimately, to a metaphysics that could undergird a positivist's view of science.[4]

This correspondence theory manifests itself in various ways throughout the tradition of philosophy. This

view, however, is a distortion evoked by the story we give about the way we learn language. We are misled to take a linguistic "thing" as an actual thing and then build a metaphysics of essence and correspondence on top of it. The purpose of entertaining such philosophies is to get a handle on what is true and what is false by establishing a standard in light of which correct judgments may be made.

For Wittgenstein, however, names are not "tags," nor do we arrive at judgments by comparing and seeing what things fall under certain categories.[5] The ability to use words and make judgments comes from a whole context of use in which we learn, as if through training, what words are appropriate when. To even begin to name, much preparatory work must be done. One must already be "a master of the game." To ask how language "hooks onto" the world was thus nonsensical. The world is given together with language.

By looking at language at a very basic level, Wittgenstein attempts to show us why metaphysics is nonsense. He shows how general concepts in philosophy have no life. They are something[6] that is added, that adds nothing. This is what Wittgenstein calls "the philosophical urge: we are inclined to say something which gives no information."[7]

One might say that the eternal is exchanged for the timely, the necessary for the contingent and the universal for the local, but this would be misleading as well. The inversion of a metaphysical approach is just as metaphysical as metaphysics for Wittgenstein. The questions themselves would be denied as lacking sense. Instead of argument, instead of being drawn into philosophical debate, Wittgenstein would simply point to various language games, and show how we might use words, and how we might behave when we did so.

In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates asks, "What is Virtue?" Meno, a statesman involved in the practical concerns of life, answers with specific instances of excellent behavior:

> for a man, he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefit his friends and harm his enemies; and he must also be careful not to suffer harm himself. A woman's virtue, if you wish to know about that, may also be easily described: her duty is to order her house, and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband. Every age, every condition of life, young or old, male or female, bond or free, has a different virtue: there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them; for virtue is relative to the actions and ages of each of us in all that we do.[8]

Socrates, however, is not satisfied. He insists that there must be a "nature" of virtue. He insists that there is something about the word that allows us to use it appropriately in all these specific instances. He looks for an "essence."

For Wittgenstein, Meno's answer would be sufficient. Socrates felt pulled by the language to say more apart from the specific contexts in which the word was used, but the word does not have an essence that precedes its use in contexts and gives us one fixed general meaning. It does not have a "nature" that sets the conditions for all its possible uses. It simply has a "family resemblance" to its other uses.[9]

Essence as Tacit Integration

I believe that the insights of Wittgenstein, by pointing out the flaws in the traditional ways of taking philosophical knowledge, allow us to build a better picture of what knowing is like.

The seeds of such an epistemology are found in Polanyi's exploration of tacit knowledge. He presents a picture that begins to make sense of the phenomena that Wittgenstein unravels. For Polanyi, a general concept is not an abstraction of what is common to particular occurrences —it is not a lowest common denominator— it is rather the "joint significance" of the particulars that tacitly comprise it. And this joint significance is, in an important sense, the condition for the possibility of the very intelligibility of the particulars.

According to Polanyi, when we attend to something, when we focus our awareness, we attend from a group of subsidiary clues that are tacit. The tacit clues can never be made explicit in the way that a philosopher would like them to be because (1) when we focus our attention on these clues, they do not perform the same function as they do when we attend from them as clues, and (2) when we attend to them, we attend from other clues which are tacit in relation to what we now have as our focal knowledge.

There is always a tacit dimension to knowledge that we cannot hope to completely eradicate. We can get somewhat clearer on many of the clues by focusing on them, but we can never make explicit all the clues that go into an awareness, or how they might be organized, arranged and added to in the future. There is also a hierarchy, or community, of levels that work together to provide us with a focal knowledge. And this focal awareness, though composite, will always present itself as something primitive and "given." There is a "vectoral quality" to the clues, which carries us directly to the focus. The particulars that bring us to the meaning are thus, in an important sense, "transparent." [10]

A simple example of this can be draw from linguistic comprehension. When we attend to a word on a page, we attend from the particular letters as clues to the word. When we attend to the meaning of a sentence, we attend from the words in the sentence and their organization. When we attend to the meaning of a paragraph, we attend from the sentences and their organization.

We do not see the letters of a word in the same way, when we look at the letters, as we do when we look through the letters to their joint meaning as a word. We do not see the individual words in the same way as we do when we look from them to their joint meaning in a sentence. There is a "from/to" or "from/at" structure to knowing in which what are taken as "clues" work tacitly to present us with a focal awareness, and this rough, general structure seems to work in most forms of understanding and perception.

When we turn to look back at the meaning of the particular clues that comprise a joint significance in a focal awareness —when the clues become the focus of our interest— we look through that joint significance as a key tacit clue. When we look to the meaning of a word after reading the sentence as a whole, not only the letters of the word and the experiences we have had of the word's use, but also what we perceive as the joint meaning of the words in the sentence as a whole, acts as a clue to how that word is taken. A joint significance becomes like a tacit lens that the clues are "looked at" "through."

Polanyi believes that Plato was noting a basic experience that contains a valuable lesson when he noted that a "nature" or "essence", which gets developed into "Forms" or "Ideas" that provide intelligibilIty, corresponds with a class of particulars.[11] Plato, however, was partially wrong to give that essence a precedence completely independent from its particular occurrences.[12] In Polanyi's terminology, the particular instances of men and women would be the clues to the joint significance we name "human being" in general, or "man." The current concept has epistemological value, but does not legislate *a priori* for all time what we may or may not consider an instance of a man or what his or her potentialities might be. The general concept is dependent on the subsidiary clues, and how they are taken, to give us a picture of what the human being is, and the picture lets us see different avenues and possibilities for what we will regard as an instance of that concept in the future.

The individual concept, "human being," will be affected by the larger picture of the philosophical system in the same way that the meaning of a word is affected by the sentence, paragraph, chapter, part and ultimately the "story." The "joint significance" of each level is like a "picture" in that it gives us a way of looking at the clues that help to constitute it, and it gives us ways of going on in a consistent manner.

Metaphysical Thinking as a Skill

Polanyi, like Wittgenstein, was a keen observer of ordinary experience. His paradigm of how knowledge works is developed from many types of common experiences of knowing that are well grounded in "roughness" of experience.[13]

In the very process of perception and sensation, we dwell in the subsidiary knowledge of bodily clues that combine in the joint significance of a visual image, a taste, a sound, a smell, a touch. Here, as in other cases of tacit knowing, when we look at the clues (the nervous system for one), we have a different understanding than when we look through the clues to their joint meaning (a perception).

How a doctor recognizes a disease; how we work the muscles of the eyes and attend from the clues of two pictures in order to have stereoscopic vision; how a swimmer swims, a pianist plays, or a fighter fights — all paying little or no attention to the complicated bodily manipulations they must make in performing their tasks— are all examples of tacit knowing.

Similarly, how a scientist may pursue an answer to a question left open in her field and make a discovery is deeply analogous to how a person who seeks to master a physical skill will proceed. The scientist will analyze and synthesize knowledge, working from theory to facts and from facts back to theory. The master of an art will analyze her skill to learn its components, practice individual movements and then re-synthesize them in a fluid performance, perhaps innovating along the way.

Polanyi comes to the realization that knowledge is very much a skill: "Though we may prefer to speak of understanding a comprehensive object or situation and of mastering a skill, we do use the two words nearly as synonyms. Actually we speak equally of grasping a subject or an art."[14]

Knowledge and skill deepens by an analytic breaking down of theory (where the joint comprehension or meaning of the data is no longer in focus) and a synthetic reformulation of theory (where the data can once again be ordered and understood in terms of a new theoretical picture).

For Wittgenstein, seeing understanding as a training, or habit, broke the "necessity" that we feel when pulled to a philosophical conclusion. It tore at the idea of a special "intuition" involved in coming to understand.[15] Knowledge was thus a construct of human dimensions; the "pull" towards empty generalizations was unmasked and the necessity behind philosophical judgments was delegitimized.

For Polanyi, that knowledge is a skill does not delegitimize it but makes it an accomplishment. Through Polanyi's picture, we can see how "essences" and philosophical pictures are constructed in one sense and yet valid in another.[16] We come to see "essence" as an epistemological structure with such a phenomenological force that "it" seems to demand an ontological status.[17]

In most traditional accounts, an essence is *a priori*, universal, necessary and eternal. Our experience, in contrast is *a posteriori*, local, contingent, and in history.

The "*a priori*" conception of essence can be drawn from the intelligibility that a joint comprehension provides for its clues. The subsidiary clues brought to bear are, to use Wittgenstein's terminology, "neither a something nor a nothing"[18] before a joint comprehension arises to give sense to them. We can identify particulars only after we look back to them through this gestalt. In an epistemological sense, then, the joint comprehension comes first. It seems anterior to the particulars we experience, since we cannot conceive particular clues without it.

The "universal" aspect of these essences can also be seen here. A joint comprehension becomes the guiding picture that helps us identify what members fall within its class. The word that is associated with the joint comprehension of men and women will quite naturally cover everything we see as a human, since the joint comprehension we name acts tacitly to give us the criteria to distinguish human beings from all other things; it is our tool for identifying the particular case from the start.

The felt "necessity" that Wittgenstein describes and undermines in his discussions of "rule following" would come from the "vectoral quality" of tacit integration. We run through the clues in such a way that we perceive the focal meaning as "immediately" before us. There is no gap open to question the tacit inference that leads us forward from subsidiary sensory stimulation to a perception, or from signs to their focal meaning.[19] When we open our eyes, we do not see the two distinct pictures that are fused together to give us stereoscopic vision. When we see the letters "c", "a" and "t" concatenated, we are transported directly to the focal meaning of the word "cat."

The "eternal" aspect can also be seen in how the joint focus stands outside of time. None of the particular historical instances that make up a joint comprehension is sufficient to capture it. It stands beyond them and, due to its role in providing intelligibility, cannot be perceived to change. It remains the fixed point. In that this joint comprehension operates tacitly, we see the non-discursive nature of the Ideas. All explicit definitions will fall short at some point. The best definition is just another clue to the joint comprehension that guides our understanding. Yet we can have explicit knowledge. We can examine the clues that we do see and continually deepen our understanding through a continual process of analysis and re-synthesis.[20]

Whereas Wittgenstein said, "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,"[21] Polanyi would say "Speak! Say as much as you can say in the best way you can say it, but realize that even the best formulations will never completely capture the tacit underpinnings of thought."

One way Wittgenstein breaks philosophical pictures is to show us that there can always be another way of taking something. He demonstrates that there is always another way to go on which is not open to us because of the picture we are currently employing.

This I see as Wittgenstein's general strategy or method: he disrupts our ordinary notions of general concepts and general systematic philosophical pictures by taking our attention off the joint significance of the clues and directing our attention to the clues themselves. For instance, in discussing how the concept of "game" has no essence, he points to various particular games and shows how there is nothing that is common to all of them. Since perceiving the joint meaning is a skill that relies on "tacit integration" —like any other skill— if you attend directly to the subsidiary processes or clues that make the skill work, you will disrupt its smooth performance and cause it to stall.[22] Just as if, while playing the piano, we began to focus our attention on the subsidiary movements in the muscles of our fingers, the music jars to a halt.

Skills are closely related to habits. Developing a skill is training a habit. Wittgenstein gets us to break our old habits of thinking. This is good because that something is a habit does not give it justification. It is also good because it shows that different habits are possible. It is bad and Wittgenstein is wrong (in a moral sense) because skills/habits do get things done and joint comprehensions can give us some standards by which we may determine goals and establish values. Also it is wrong (in an epistemological sense) because Wittgenstein sometimes obscures the fact that we are always proceeding from habits (of seeing, thought, action, etc.) that are tacit. We cannot simply lay everything out in plain view so that we might just "look"! We are always "seeing as," even when we look neither at the duck nor the rabbit but at the lines on a page. The "look" abides not without tacit clues.[23]

We cannot simply take off our spectacles to see the world aright. To see at all we must look through tacit lenses, or we fumble in a discrete darkness where nothing can be identified. To say this is to say that metaphysics, in a sense, is inevitable.

Conclusion: Metaphysical Meaning

Wittgenstein breaks apart the "essence" of general concepts to show a family resemblance between our experiences of a word in its ordinary use. Polanyi groups together experiences of knowing that have a family resemblance and the joint significance of this group is the general structure of tacit knowing.

Through his notion of tacit integration, Polanyi validates the construction of wholes by which we can make some parts more intelligible and bring them into sharper focus. By allowing us to reconstruct the notion of essence, he takes the first step in legitimizing the building of systems by which we can better understand our experiences in general. He legitimizes metaphysics.

Polanyi needs to restore metaphysics because he means to restore faith in human values against a reductionism that he saw as inherent in an objectivist epistemology of science.

Wittgenstein would deny that any such restoration of metaphysics is necessary to uphold values. The need to develop a way to rationally justify values is also a philosophical mistake according to Wittgenstein. He doesn't seek to justify any particular system of values, or even attempt to justify —as Polanyi does— the credibility of systems of values in general, but undermines any philosophic conception that would claim to

substantiate values.

The differences between Wittgenstein and Polanyi may best be described in their approach to metaphysical questions. For instance: What is the meaning of life?

For Wittgenstein, the answer lies in breaking the grip of the question. After a dialectical struggle, we may come to see that the question, asked at such a general level, makes no sense. So instead of general meanings, Wittgenstein might point to specific local areas where such "meanings" may be found: the satisfaction of a day's work, the smile of a loved one, etc.

Polanyi, on the other hand, would want to say that sense can indeed be given to the question. The meaning of life is the joint comprehension of the activities and thoughts that we believe make a human life worth living. Such a general meaning can never be made fully explicit, but can be captured for us and reflected back in rituals, explicit values and maxims that guide the way life is to be lived if it is to be meaningful. One might then advance a work ethic or family values as an attempt to partially systematize those experiences that might make life meaningful for us and as a way to initiate others into an understanding of the particular experiences we find worthwhile.

Endnotes

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953.

[2] Such as that on Frege's theory of reference, Russell's definite descriptions, and the early Wittgenstein's view of logic as an intermediary between language and the world.

[3] My interpretation of Wittgenstein as an anti-essentialist might be challenged. Wittgenstein's work allows us to clarify the notion of essence, yet any notion strictly derivable from Wittgenstein's view would lose the characteristics that have marked "essence" in philosophy and look nothing like Plato's Ideas or Polanyi's reconstruction of them. Though one might conceivably get normative concepts for understanding and prediction locally in language games, as I see it, metaphysics is still out of bounds for Wittgenstein.

[4] In British "empirical" and twentieth century positivist philosophy, however, the Platonic Ideas became mental representations or sense impressions, and the Good and the Beautiful became subjective and relative, while the true and the false could still be considered objectively determined.

[5] Hence a judgement is not simply "representation of a representation" as it was for Kant.

[6] This already shows how speaking in a language is to be misled and to mislead: saying "they" are "something" already pushes us towards an ontological claim. Our language leads us to expect a "something" wherever we direct our attention— so it is with the positing of "faculties" for psychology: we tend to think that there must be a "something" that issues in types of behavior. And so it is with our private "sensations." We treat them as a "something" when, as Wittgenstein says, they are "neither a something or a nothing." See Wittgenstein, *PI*, p. 102.

[7] Wittgenstein, *PI*, section 298.

[8] Plato's *Meno*, #71 and #72. The blatant sexism of Meno's comment, which is more visible from the perspective of today's society, highlights a certain dependency of words on the local and historical context of their use.

[9] Here we see an opening to the heart of John Dewey's criticism of philosophical metaphysics. For Dewey, the philosophical fallacy is taking the consummatory result of a series and making it antecedent. Then attributing to this result explanatory or causal power.

[10] Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, p. 141.

[11] See Michael Polanyi, and Harry Prosch, *Meaning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp. 51-53 and Polanyi, *KB*, p. 165.

[12] If that is what Plato did— his use of "recollection" leaves this vague.

[13] Some of the experiences Polanyi points to in relaying an understanding of tacit knowing are: "(1) the understanding of physiognomies, (2) the performance of skills. (3) the proper use of sense organs, and (4) the mastery of tools and probes." In Polanyi, KB, p. 128. See also "Tacit Knowing" in Polanyi, KB, p. 163.

[14] Polanyi, *KB*, p. 126.

[15] Particularly helpful here is Juliet Floyd's paper, "Wittgenstein on 2,2,2...: The Opening of Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics" in *Synthese 87*, 1991, pp. 143-180. We see here how, for Wittgenstein, even the expectation we would have regarding "how to go on" in a mathematical series is a "training" and defies the necessity we ordinarily associate with mathematics.

[16] It is also important to note that there are different types and levels of joint comprehensions. An "Idea" can be a joint focus, an "object" can be a joint focus, an "image" can be a joint focus. Also, not all general concepts are "essential." Some categorizations can integrate particular experiences to cut nature at the joints. These are usually the natural "classes." Others are more arbitrary associations. Sorting out which categories and theoretical pictures do have endurance is the task for a community of inquirers who have what Polanyi calls "universal intent."

[17] The ontological status of such objectifications is a further claim that Polanyi is willing to make, but at present I wish merely to point out how the phenomena of tacit integration can pull us towards a more traditional account of essences. For the puroses of this paper, then, I concentrate on the epistemological and forgo a discussion of an ontological correlate. I do believe that these essences can direct our attention to reality, and unveil it, but to say that they are therefore "real", as Polanyi and Plato do, may gerrymander the language a bit too much. Also, given Polanyi's structure of knowing, to say there is a one to one correspondence between the essence we name and an existing entity may be too much of a simplification.

[18] Wittgenstein, *PI*, p. 102.

[19] This is key for understanding the composite nature of "primitive" intuitions. Similarly, there are no gaps left open to question the tacit knowledge that leads us forward from accepted premises to "necessary" conclusions.

[20] In the extreme cases of a scientific "revolution," this process can be seen most clearly. The gathering of facts in a field of knowledge can outmode our theoretical understanding of how they go together. A "paradigm" is very much a joint comprehension of meaning that is seen through to the "facts" that it organizes. This accounts for the indefinability of the paradigm with which Thomas Kuhn struggles. (See *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.) The paradigm operates as tacit knowledge and — like the Ideas of Plato— any discursive rendition will ultimately fall short. A theory is an explicit rendering of a joint comprehension that we look through to understand. As such, it is always the explicit formulation of that which is tacit— hence subject to the limitations of any set of tacit clues viewed focally.

[21] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1922, p. 189.

[22] Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, p. 126.

[23] Which brings us to what? An infinite regress or an assessment of the human condition given the nature of consciousness?

Notes on Contributors

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Richard Allen read philosophy at Nottingham University; taught in school, and then at Loughborough College. of Education, Sokoto College of Education (Nigeria), and The University of the West Indies (Trinidad). He took a Ph.D. (external) at London on Polanyi's philosophy and Christian Theism, since published. Allen recently edited *Society, Economics and Philosophy-Selected Papers of Michael Polanyi* which was reviewed in *TAD*: 25:3; he also edits and publishes *Appraisal*.

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Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered.

Manuscripts normally will be sent out for blind review. Authors are expected to provide a hard copy and a disk or an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment. Be sure that electronic materials include all relevant information which may help converting files. Persons with questions or problems associated with producing an electronic copy of manuscripts should phone or write Phil Mullins (816-271-4386). Insofar as possible, *TAD* is willing to work with authors who have special problems producing electronic materials.

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