

# WALTER GULICK'S RECOVERING TRUTHS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANTHOLOGY OF MICHAEL POLANYI'S WRITINGS



Kriszta Sajber

**Keywords:** Walter Gulick, Recovering Truths, tacit dimension, inarticulate intelligence, post-critical philosophy, Michael Polanyi

## ABSTRACT

*This well-organized collection offers a blueprint for tracing continuity in Polanyi's lifelong intellectual output. Gulick's Recovering Truths: A Comprehensive Anthology of Michael Polanyi's Writings makes it possible for anyone interested in Polanyi's writings to explore the overall philosophical stance from which Polanyi's thought originates. In addition to key texts from Polanyi's oeuvre, the volume introduces the reader to the method by which Polanyi's philosophy transcends disciplinary preoccupations and transforms the post-Cartesian intellectual terrain through the conceptual tools of a post-critical philosophy.*

The idea of compiling a reader of Michael Polanyi's works was born among members of the Polanyi Circle contemplating "how better to awaken people to the ongoing significance of Michael Polanyi's thought" (Preface, 1).<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny that Michael Polanyi's ideas continue to influence a large number of academic fields. The reader contains text selections in most of these areas: human knowledge, scientific discovery, social and economic thought, the structure of reality, and post-critical philosophy. In these, the reader will find a handy resource for locating some of the ideas for which Polanyi remains of interest in a variety of scholarly circles: epistemology and the philosophy of embodiment, philosophy and sociology of science, organizational management, economic theory, democratic theory, religious studies, literary criticism

and a wide variety of the humanities. Given this range of influence, this volume is without a doubt a welcome addition to scholarship on Polanyian thought.

Since primers are often consulted as compilations of the most influential texts of a thinker, those interested in *Recovering Truths* may reach for it at first with the intention of studying merely one or two facets of Polanyi's versatile philosophy. Before long, however, they will discover a life-long project far from fragmentary, a discovery made possible by the way in which Gulick juxtaposes his selection of Polanyi's texts. The fact that Polanyi wrote

about savings and investment, the anthropology of preliterate people, the role of authority in society, visionary poetry, science in contrast to technology, learning theory, patents, mythology, nihilism, evolutionary theory, the Hungarian revolution, metaphor, causal explanation, illusion in painting, totalitarianism, probability, the role of faith and passion in intellectual life, creativity and discovery (Why Read Michael Polanyi, 4),

makes an anthology like *Recovering Truths* necessary, yet close to impossible to assemble. Gulick approached his editorial task and the difficulties inherent in choosing selections from the kaleidoscopic diversity of topics featured in Polanyi's works through a method that is itself uniquely Polanyian. Basing himself on the variety of topics as subsidiaries upon which to rely for understanding what is of focal significance, he selected a collection that exposes the most powerfully cohesive thread connecting Michael Polanyi's writings.

The distinctiveness of Polanyi's philosophy, according to Gulick, may be attributed to the fact that "his thought as a whole is derived from his passion to combat breakdowns in the functioning of Western society in the twentieth century" (Why Read Michael Polanyi, 9). Polanyi relied on a multiplicity of sources in search of a comprehensive methodological and philosophical vision, one that is capable of overcoming breakdowns that atomize and divide us, whether in the form of scholarly compartmentalization or personal detachment. This is why "no one of Polanyi's works quite manages to illuminate all the facets of his synoptic vision," and this is why an anthology is needed to provide a "comprehensive yet also systematic insight into his philosophy" (Why Read Michael Polanyi, 5).

Continuity thus becomes the leitmotif of *Recovering Truths* and for the editorial commentary by which text selections from Polanyi's work are annotated. The focus on consistency in the Polanyian *oeuvre* serves not only as the selective principle for the presentation of Polanyi's work, but as the editor's primary means of offering opportunities to read Polanyi unbroken and in one piece—in a wholesomeness composed, strangely enough, from slices cut from his writings. Though this may strike one as

paradoxical, that isolated sections from Michael Polanyi's corpus of work have made a significant influence in a number of academic disciplines is precisely the problem this Polanyi anthology seeks to alleviate. As Gulick writes: "[Polanyi's work] is still referred to in academic circles with some frequency, but it is rarely fully engaged." As such, it merely "hovers at the margins of cultural consciousness today," even though "only a little study of his ideas reveals...their potential to illuminate and perhaps even to heal many of the problems at the center of contemporary concern" (Why Read Michael Polanyi, 1). For as long as Polanyi's work is engaged in this piecemeal fashion, Gulick contends, the internal logic at work in the engagement of what are frequently unconnected Polanyian subjects of investigation is lost from view. *Recovering Truths* thus offers a portrait of an author that goes beyond being merely of Polanyi, and succeeds at being Polanyian through and through. Gulick's editorial work uncovers continuity in Polanyi's lifelong intellectual output and presents it in an expository format perfectly suitable to and worthy of the sources upon which he draws. Content and method in this way align into a fortuitous relationship in support of illuminating Polanyi's work and its original significance.

It is customary for book reviews to summarize the argument that serves as the connecting thread of a publication. This, however, is difficult in the case of an anthology, since the specific strength of this genre lies in the principles by which selections are chosen for inclusion in the compendium. Nevertheless, *Recovering Truths* does present its topic as a specific progression of ideas: the arrangement of Polanyi's thought clearly fits an expository pattern. A presentation of the comprehensive philosophy of Michael Polanyi begins in Chapter II, which contains an overview of Polanyi's views on human knowledge, including his ideas about the tacit dimension. Subsequently, the second set of selections in Chapter III describes heuristic acts that connect and build on the sense-making activity of perception and individuated thought through participation in social formations directed at intellectual discovery.

Following the chapter about scientific activity and the possibilities of a collective understanding and discovery of truth, Chapter IV details Polanyi's engagement with the historic and political realities of his time and collects his ideas concerning politics, society and economics. The fourth compilation of quotes and crucial concepts, contained in Chapter V, lays out Polanyi's thoughts on truth and reality, whereas Chapter VI, the final selection, composes an ode to commitment, highlighting the centrality of personal meaning and religion in Polanyi's own intellectual commitments. These chapters are supplemented by a glossary of key Polanyian concepts as well as an introduction, Chapter I of the volume, which serves two functions. An original essay by the editor, the introduction defends the ongoing relevance of studying Polanyi's thought restored to its comprehensive systematicity. At the same time, it also provides a bibliographic sketch of Polanyi's eventful life. Especially valuable in this introductory chapter is the assessment of Polanyi's impact on a number of 20th century thinkers

(Catherine Z. Elgin, Marjorie Grene, William Poteat, Mark Johnson, Andy Clark, Harry Collins, and Charles Taylor), as well as the concise yet thorough survey of the manifold intellectual influences likely responsible for the accumulation of Polanyi's unique set of intellectual concerns and ideas.

Each of the chapters is organized in a similar fashion: subsequent to the author's expert introduction of crucial themes, which often contain brief but informative ways to relate Polanyi's ideas within a given disciplinary context, the topography of Polanyi's ideas is assembled from a collection of short quotations on each chapter's topic. This composition of a landscape of ideas is then carefully enhanced through "summary selections:" longer passages carefully chosen for in-depth study, with editorial remarks to guide their reading. Further examination of key concepts may be made with the help of the Glossary, which focuses on key concepts of Polanyian thought.

*Recovering Truths* engages with theories of personal knowledge both at the outset and in its conclusion: the systematic and comprehensive picture presented in the book is of a humanist thinker focused on personal forms of meaning and understanding. Fully supported, as well, is an interpretation of Polanyi's works as a philosophy of the post-critical stance, grounded in an ontology of commitment. Gulick's selections trace the conditions of possibility for human understanding throughout the chapters, culminating in Polanyi's reckoning with the ultimate question of what provides systematicity for his own thought. The idea of a post-critical philosophy—Polanyi's most comprehensive and distinctive subject matter according to the editor of the volume as well as the author of this review—receives full treatment only in this final chapter of the selections. The framework it provides for interpreting Polanyi's writings as one unitary intellectual project is nevertheless present as a point of reference in the editor's commentary on the text selections in all of the preceding chapters.

It is important to highlight the fact that selections taken from *Personal Knowledge* (1958)—Polanyi's *magnum opus*, as Gulick regularly refers to it—are in a dominant majority in the quotes and passages chosen for adoption to the reader, at least in the chapters that reflect on the human potential for knowing, believing and understanding. Polanyi's similarly significant works are also quoted, though far less frequently, despite the fact that Polanyi implemented many important refinements to the role played by the tacit dimension during his continued engagement with the topic during the decade following the publication of *Personal Knowledge*. For this reason, readers who find the *Tacit Dimension* (1966) or of *Knowing and Being* (1969)—shorter volumes written after *Personal Knowledge*—similarly if not more definitive of Polanyi's philosophy may be disappointed by the anthology's fidelity to Polanyi's thought in the form in which it was stated in 1958. As far as a unified theory of embodied consciousness and tacit knowledge is concerned, Polanyi's more nuanced statements from his later publications are substituted, for the most part, for writings reflecting an earlier stage of Polanyi's thinking.

There can be no doubt that *Personal Knowledge* is the most systematic exposition of Polanyi's ideas, and therefore there are good reasons to use it as the main pillar of a Polanyi reader. One disadvantage of this approach, however, is that Polanyi relies on developmental as well as intrinsic hierarchies among the various components of the work of the intellect for the systematic exposition of his philosophy in *Personal Knowledge*, which leads him to present human understanding in a normative framework, with implications that certain achievements of the human intellect are inherently superior to others.<sup>2</sup> One might hold that Polanyi's signature sensitivity for the potential inherent in human thought to transcend rigid boundaries imposed on its creativity is crucially more Polanyian than the mold imposed on the same ideas by his method of presentation in *Personal Knowledge*. The gestalt of the background/foreground structure through which human perception is animated, the connectivity imposed by the to-from structure on the components of several varieties of human understanding, or the type of explicatory work involved in indwelling or in overcoming detachment through fidelity and commitment all stress that human modes of knowledge, even when they impose categories for conceptualization, do so without particular regard for instituting intellectual hierarchies. Polanyi's original insights about the constituent structures from which a variety of forms of human understanding emerge are all too often given rankings in *Recovering Truths*. An examination of their dynamic interaction within a tacit dimension may be unduly foreclosed in this way. Examples of these, in my opinion, are the presentation of degrees and levels of personhood in Chapter V (Recovering a Truer Understanding of Reality, Personhood, and Meaning, 4) or in the hierarchy of forms of knowledge detailed in Chapter II.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter II and its discussion of a hierarchy of modes of knowing expressly demonstrates the limitations imposed on the task of providing a systematic overview of Polanyi's philosophy through the comprehensive structure of *Personal Knowledge*. This chapter contains what is perhaps the most surprising choice of a passage for inclusion in the collection, as well as what may be the greatest discovery of a rare gem of a text in the entire volume. The subject matter of the former is inarticulate intelligence observable in animals and children. In the text included in *Recovering Truths*, Polanyi, relying on the work of B. F. Skinner, Pavlov, Köhler and Piaget, ranks three ways of learning (trick, sign, and latent) in the order of the degree to which essential features of problem-solving are apparent in them, (Varieties of Human Knowing, 11-15). On the one hand, the passage is abridged in a way that strips it from conclusions Polanyi himself drew from his discussion of inarticulate intelligence. Perhaps even more importantly, the anthropocentrism of this unusually lengthy selection, and of the times during which it had been written, is on plain view on these pages. During the past two decades, animal scientists offered convincing evidence to disprove a number of the claims that anchor Polanyi's argument in this passage, for example that "animals learn only when impelled by desire or fear" (Varieties of Human Knowing, 13), or that

animals are incapable of language use.<sup>4</sup> To untangle the problem of whether one might find better philosophical basis in Polanyi's later writings on tacit knowledge for conceptualizing the type of things human beings understand by virtue of their pre-linguistic capacities would be beyond the scope of this review to settle. Viewed through the lens of the textual selections alone, however, Polanyi's ideas appear rigid and inflexible in their pronouncements. One may consider this particular choice of a text, in conjunction with the omission of Polanyi's own conflicting reflections on the topic,<sup>5</sup> a missed opportunity to present Polanyi as a brilliant but sometimes enigmatic thinker whose intricate ideas are compelling at times precisely because of the elaborate interpretative challenges they pose.

At the same time, in the same chapter the reader will be delighted to discover an essay reprinted almost in its entirety from *Man and the Science of Man* (1968), a book scarcely available despite its importance for exploring Polanyi's unique philosophy of the body. In "*The Body-Mind Relation*" (1965), an essay composed relatively late during Polanyi's career, we see Polanyi at the height of his finesse to draw on ideas, scientific experiments, the laws of physics and select works of literature—sources of intellectual inspiration vast and varied beyond the imagination. Drawing on his evolving thought on tacit knowledge, Polanyi proposes an intriguing theory in this essay, according to which the human body serves as the subsidiary term of the from-to structure of tacit knowing (*Varieties of Human Knowing*, 29). He then goes on to define consciousness itself as the integration of body and mind arranged in such a way that the particulars contributed by the body are organized in a subsidiary manner to the centrality of conscious acts (*Varieties of Human Knowing*, 31). Readers of *Tacit Knowledge* will find this intricately argued and thought-provoking text an important supplement to Polanyi's contributions to the philosophy of embodiment unavailable, for the most part, in works of Polanyi currently in circulation.

All in all, the word that describes Walter Gulick's *Recovering Truths* in Hungarian, Michael Polanyi's original language, is *hiánypótló*: a remedy for something thus far sorely missing. An adjective much in vogue in post-Communist Hungary, where there are ample opportunities to identify items rectifying necessities only recently discovered as existing, *hiánypótló* literally means something that fills in a gap suddenly exposed, a substitute that resolves a lack or need through bridging the distance opened up by absence. In the same manner as the logic of the Hungarian idiom indicates, *Recovering Truths* also attends to a problem that its reader may not have spotted prior to reading it. Despite eight volumes conveniently available in English of Michael Polanyi's writings, and almost twice as many book-length interpretations of his philosophy, a comprehensive selection of Michael Polanyi's thought stated in the author's own words has been regretfully lacking.

Nothing can facilitate more the understanding of a thinker of Polanyi's multitudinous talents than a selection made of his ideas with a view toward discerning the overall

coherence and systematicity definitive of Polanyi's academic preoccupations as a whole. Polanyi's thought extends to a bewildering array of topics, as those already familiar with Polanyi's prolific intellectual output know, and the compilation of a reader that can provide for such thus-far unrecognized need is not made any easier by this fact. Gulick's editorial work on this volume makes it possible for anyone interested in Polanyi's writings to explore the overall philosophical stance from which Polanyi's analyses originate. Through exploring *Recovering Truths*, the reader is gradually introduced to the method by which Polanyi's philosophy transcends disciplinary preoccupations in an attempt to restore the post-Cartesian intellectual terrain to the rich conceptual landscape of a post-critical philosophy. As Gulick correctly promises to his readers, only in view of having followed Polanyi beyond the cracks and the divisions in our knowledge of ourselves and the world can we see the significance of Polanyi's thought truly emerge and made ready for appreciation.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Given how the document is paginated, citations will be given by chapter title and page number.

<sup>2</sup>Much depends on one's interpretation of the normative implications clearly indicated throughout *Personal Knowledge* for appreciating this concern. Sometimes Polanyi's text reads as if the hierarchy is only of different expressions of the work of human intellect, while in other instances the phrasing implies that the ranking is applied to intellectual achievements.

<sup>3</sup>Gulick is most certainly justified to emphasize hierarchies of reality in Chapter V. Polanyi's hierarchical view of reality provides quintessential metaphysical grounding for his thought; however, a commitment to hierarchies on the ontological level need not imply that cognitive and pre-cognitive achievements are themselves hierarchically ordered.

<sup>4</sup>Frans de Waals' *Are We Smart Enough to Realize How Smart Animals Are?* (2016) provides excellent introduction to the extent to which anthropocentrism distorted and continues to distort our understanding of animal science and contains an extensive bibliography of the scientific literature. De Waals' discussion of "anthropodenial" is especially useful for explaining the biases of the animal science upon which Polanyi relied.

<sup>5</sup>Polanyi's own remarks, not included in *Recovering Truths*, contend that an enormous "gap" separates the intelligence of infants and animals from "the intellectual superiority of man" (see *PK*, 71).

## REFERENCES

- De Waal, Frans. 2016. *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Gulick, Walter (ed). 2012. *Recovering Truths: A Comprehensive Anthology of Michael Polanyi's Writings*, digital publication (Google Docs).
- Polanyi, Michael. 1969. *Knowing and Being*. Marjorie Grene (ed). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1958. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1968 "The Body-Mind Relation" (1965) in Coulson, William R. and Carl R. Rogers (eds). *Man and the Science of Man*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1966. *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.