

POLANYI AND PARTICIPATORY KNOWING: A RESPONSE TO JACOB SHERMAN’S “POLANYI AND THE PARTICIPATORY TURN: REIMAGINING RELIGIOUS STUDIES”

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ABSTRACT

As background for explaining what The Participatory Turn is all about, Jacob Sherman does a marvelous job of situating and clarifying current controversies in religious studies methodology. As well, he does a marvelous job in showing how Bruno Latour’s bracing explanation of the predicament of modern culture illuminates Polanyi’s enterprise in developing, first, a post-critical philosophy that counteracts the predicament of modernity and, second, a convincing, constructive post-modern (i.e., post-critical) account of the personal, tacit, and fiduciary coefficient of knowledge in its many forms, especially scientific knowledge. His account of Polanyi’s philosophical enterprise and Polanyi’s understanding of knowing in all of its dimensions is remarkably sophisticated and deep, as fine as any seasoned Polanyi scholar could give.



Introduction

At the American Academy of Religion (November 2010), I happened upon a special section featuring a panel of the authors of the newly published *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies* (Ferrer and Sherman 2009). I hoped to connect briefly with one of the two co-editors, Jorge Ferrer of the California Institute of Integral Studies, located in San Francisco, in whose work on re-visioning transpersonal psychology I had independently developed an interest. In the few minutes before the session started, Jorge introduced me to the other co-editor, Jacob Sherman, also then of the California Institute of Integral Studies. Some months later he referred me to Sherman to make a possible contribution to the the Polanyi Society’s 2011 meeting, which Sherman graciously accepted. What motivated me to ask for a contribution was the remarkably deep resonance I sensed between the ideas that Sherman and Ferrer were presenting and Polanyi’s thought—as Sherman’s fine paper has well demonstrated.

A number of members of the Polanyi Society have for years sought to build bridges of understanding that would demonstrate the relevance of Polanyi’s thought to religious studies. I happen to think that the bridge of understanding demonstrating this relevance has already been built or is at least nearing completion,

from the other side, with the publication of *The Participatory Turn* and Sherman's contribution to this volume of *Tradition and Discovery*. I call your attention to the significance of this new development for religious studies and for Polanyi studies.

In the words of Richard Tarnas (from the book's back cover), "In its quiet, careful way, *The Participatory Turn* is at once a nuanced portrait of a great sea change taking place in Religious Studies and a clear-eyed manifesto on behalf of that change. In their brilliant introduction, Ferrer and Sherman have managed to condense and summarize a vast and complex field, clarified its multitude of diverse strands, and set forth a richly coherent philosophical synthesis." Unlike many of us more old-fashioned types who have little patience with the reductionism, relativism, constructivism, and historicism that seems rife within it, these authors have approached the plethora of scholarship with a dogged "Polanyian-style" disposition of personal indwelling and faith in the possibility of connecting with Reality and Truth at a profound level. They seem to be coming up with promising, exciting results and have blazed a trail for others to follow. Continuing with Richard Tarnas's quote,

One senses that with this book and the intellectual shift it describes, the academic study of religion has, quite dramatically, come in from the cold. The book delineates a pathway for the discipline to enter back into direct engagement with the great mystery it seeks to illuminate, employing the many critical advances of the past century's scholarship but in a manner that is no longer constrained by the hidden reductionism of many conventional academic assumptions. *The Participatory Turn* presents an emerging orientation for Religious Studies that is not only cogent and empowering but perhaps even inevitable. (Back cover copy of *Participatory Turn*)

Sherman's Account of "The Modern Problematic" and "The Participatory Turn"

In response to the invitation to write on the relationship between *The Participatory Turn* and Polanyi's philosophy, Jacob Sherman has provided us not only with an illuminating account of what is involved in the participatory turn in religious studies, and the marvelous convergence between it and Polanyi's thought, but has also (with the aid of Bruno Latour) given us one of the clearer and more concise accounts that I have seen of "the modern problematic"—its nature, its origins, and its power over us.

In a nutshell, the modern problematic is an insistence on an absolute bifurcation (both epistemic and ontological) of nature (the province of the natural sciences) from culture (the province of human freedom and creation). Meanwhile, despite this splitting off of culture from nature, the modern problematic allows and even promotes unacknowledged *hybrids* of nature and culture, primarily (it seems to me) via technology. All of this is reinforced and legitimated by a belief in what Latour calls "a crossed-out God" who is not allowed to interfere (nor allows anyone else, on pain of sacrilege, to interfere) with this sacral order in any way. Both *The Participatory Turn* and Polanyi's philosophy are direct challenges to this bifurcation. This seemingly implacable cultural formation is what they seek to overturn or at least to move beyond.

The Participatory Turn identifies itself as *an emerging academic ethos* across multiple sub-disciplines of religious studies that "refuses to be confined by either of modernity's two 'prison cells,' which Owen Barfield describes as 'the 'non-objectifying' subjectivity, in which the humanities are immured, and the adjoining cell of subjectless objectivity, where science is locked and bolted'" (9). It strikes me that this emerging ethos, as described by Sherman, has more than a family resemblance to what Polanyi speaks of as *the shift from a*

critical to a post-critical intellectual sensibility. It covers a lot of ground, and mastering it calls for mastery of a very large body of literature, only some of which is hinted at in Sherman’s paper (for the rest, see the book *The Participatory Turn*, especially the introductory essay).

More specifically, *The Participatory Turn* transcends the reductionist alternative approaches to religious studies—the scientific on the one hand and the social-linguistic on the other—via

an *enactive* understanding of the sacred, seeking to approach religious phenomena, experiences, and insights as co-created events. In Latour’s vocabulary, the participatory approach sees religious worlds and experiences as hybrids. Phenomena such as the Kabbalistic four realms, the various Buddhist cosmologies, or Teresa’s seven mansions do not exist independently of human beings but neither are they generated out of some reservoir of transcendental freedom. Instead, the participatory approach argues that such religious phenomena arise through an interaction of the entire range of human epistemic faculties (e.g., rational, imaginal, somatic, psychosemantic, and so forth) with the creative unfolding of reality, including reality in its own hyperbolic transcendence.... A key notion for understanding the participatory turn is *enactment*: we argue that in multidimensional cognition human beings *enact*—or “bring forth”—ontologically rich religious worlds. (Sherman 2024, 104, my italics)

It is remarkable that two recent, significant papers on Polanyi’s philosophical realist position speak of it as “*enactive* realism.”¹ For Polanyi, all knowing involves a participative, indwelling, fiduciary relationship between knower and known, and this in greater depth as one moves up the hierarchical levels of emergence in apprehension, comprehension, and appreciation.

Sherman’s Understanding of Polanyi

With regard to Sherman’s understanding of Polanyi as articulated in his paper, I must say I am positively impressed. His grasp of the contours of Polanyi’s thought strikes me to be as good as that of any veteran Polanyian; it is not the result of a superficial acquaintance but of a genuine, in-depth appropriation. That is particularly remarkable as Polanyi, despite being so consonant with *The Participatory Turn*, is nowhere mentioned in the book, as Sherman, with some embarrassment, mentions and seeks now to correct. It is, therefore, significant that Sherman states, “I have not queried my collaborators about this, but I can say, for my part, that Polanyi’s thought played a formative role in the creative genesis of my own thinking in all of these matters” (Sherman 2024, 105).

Two Areas of Possible Divergence

Sherman identifies two areas of possible tension, divergence, or at least possibly fruitful controversy between the trajectory of thought at the heart of *The Participatory Turn* and the thought of Polanyi. The first has to do with our fundamental conception of the nature of reality as such. Sherman writes, “As I read him, Polanyi seems to think of the personal involvement of the knower as an essential component in the revelation of the world’s many but nevertheless real faces. Only by indwelling the world—touching it with the elasticity of our bodies and deploying our passions and imagination—does the world appear and continue to appear in new, almost prophetic disclosures of its reality” (2024, 111). Sherman then says a question is raised by this assertion:

if we participate to this extraordinary degree in the perception of reality, then aren't we justified in supposing that reality may be far more *malleable* than we previously thought? This is not to suggest that reality is anarchically malleable but rather that it is susceptible to a variety of enactions.... [I]f our knowledge of the world is really like that of a probe, if we really do touch the world with the entirety of who we are—somatic, psychosemantic, imaginal, spiritual—then surely part of what we know is the world as it becomes in response to our touch. Latour speaks of this with the language of hybrids or assemblages of nature and culture. We might think of it instead as co-creation. (2024, *Ibid.*)

Sherman is suggesting that scholars of *The Participatory Turn*, particularly when it comes to making sense of the apparently competing ontological and metaphysical implications of different traditions of religious experience and finding themselves drawn to affirm that reality, at least in its ultimate dimensions of which religions, spiritualities, and mysticisms purport to speak, may be less unitary or more multiplicitous than conventional metaphysics allows. But then again, maybe not. This is a complex question, and a variety of answers may be possible. To what extent is it possible in a given case to separate what is discovered from what the means of epistemic access (that happens to be relied upon) dictates? It certainly is a controversial issue posed by *The Participatory Turn*—or perhaps I should say “reopened” by the participatory turn, for it has a long history. (I recall having broached it few years ago (2004) when I wrote that the epistemology that Esther Meek outlined in support of a conservative Protestant theology could equally be applied with few alterations in support of a Hindu or Buddhist religious ontology.)

The second area of possible divergence has to do with Polanyi's late-in-life apparent reversion to the divide between nature and culture that so much of his thought sought to overcome. Sherman indicates that he knows something of the existence among Polanyians of this internal controversy, and he acknowledges that he lacks the knowledge and competence to tackle it himself at this stage. One way of identifying it is in terms of the “realities” of culture (including the arts, religion, and the humanities): What ontological status do they have? Are they of a lesser, or sub-ontological, kind from those studied in the natural sciences? Do they exist independently of our commitment to them? Polanyi at points seems to say no. But is this a necessary conclusion for a Polanyian to take? At times, in his earlier writings, Polanyi speaks of a continuum between the arts and humanities and the natural sciences (e.g., *PK*, 321) and says that knowing in each involves a commitment to “the presence of something real and external to the speaker” (*PK*, 202). He says this in the midst of explaining how *verification* is more characteristic of what goes on in the sciences and how *validation* is more characteristic of what goes on in the arts and humanities, but not so as to break this continuum between them. At other times, especially in *Meaning*, Polanyi draws a sharper distinction between them, stressing *verification* on the one hand and *validation* on the other in a manner indicating a disjunction rather than a continuum between them. This, to Sherman, seems to manifest a reversion to the divide between nature and culture. I tend to agree that at these points Polanyi may be losing hold of his most profound insights. If so, then to what extent can we say that Polanyi transcended or overcame the divide? My agreement with Sherman indicates the side I take in this long-standing controversy among Polanyians. In any case, I believe there is much more to be productively explored on the issue, partly by way of a close analysis of different specific cases that are neither simply a matter of verification nor simply of validation, possibly involving both and maybe still other factors, and partly by way of a close analysis of the role of fiduciary commitment and indwelling in knowing so-called empirical objects—their reality may be no less

enacted. Alternatively, is there a way to embrace these comments of Polanyi that seem to indicate a reversion to the nature-culture divide without ending up marginalizing questions of religious truth or dismissing questions about the being of religious entities?

Challenges Polanyians Might Bring to the Participatory Model

Sherman indicates in his last paragraphs one area where Polanyians may have significant things to contribute to the participatory turn. Specifically, he suggests that the participatory turn movement “owes some account”—i.e., needs to develop a full-fledged philosophical justification—of how an insistence on “subcreatively enacted religious worlds as ontologically rich... can fulfill the basic requirements of realism required by such a thick ontological confession” (2024, 111). I agree that this is needed. This situation strikes me as parallel to Polanyi’s own account of the situation of early twentieth-century defenders of freedom of thought in science and culture who insist on the reality of ideals such as truth, justice, and beauty against would-be social manipulators who dismissed them as obstacles to “social progress”: What kind of reality do such ideals of truth, justice, and beauty really have? Similarly, granted their co-created nature, what kind of reality do “angels, daikinis, gods, and goddesses” and “spiritual ultimates (such as the biblical Yahweh, the Buddhist *sunyata*, or the Brahman of the Indus valley)” (*Ibid.*) really have? Is it a completely different sort of reality than empirical realities? If so, how and in what respects? Is it possible to maintain universal intent when affirming the reality of such things? If so, how and with what qualifications? Sherman is suggesting that the encounter with Polanyi’s thought “helps to raise and to clarify the contours of this problem” (*Ibid.*). Yes, I agree, but it may be that there is an even greater role for Polanyians: there may be resources from Polanyi and Polanyian scholarship that can address this problem, as well as Polanyian scholars who may be interested and willing to take this on and move toward some kind of answer to the problem. Moreover, maybe the encounter between the participatory turn and Polanyi’s thought can prompt Polanyians to revisit the issue of realism regarding social ideals such as truth, justice, and beauty and carry forward Polanyi’s answer to a fuller resolution.

Areas for Further Dialogue and Exploration

In closing, I would like to suggest a few areas for further dialogue and exploration between scholarship representing the participatory turn and Polanyi studies.

1. Because of their relevance as demonstrated in Sherman’s paper, existing published writings by Polanyi and Polanyi scholars might be made better known and accessible to participatory turn scholars, with brief comments explaining their relevance. Would this be a worthy project? Where and how might it be undertaken? What topics ought to be given priority in such an undertaking?
2. Given the areas of possible controversy between Polanyians and the participatory turn discussed above—specifically concerning different aspects of the concept of enactive realism, particularly in religious studies—it seems to me that some collaborative seminar is in order, possibly under the auspices of the AAR or completely outside it. (Some relevant efforts drawing upon Polanyi may already exist. I have in mind my own book, *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Study of Religion* [1996], which may be relevant.) I may be mistaken, but I suspect that some members of the Polanyi Society and other scholars not affiliated with it may be interested in such a venture.

3. Similarly, there may be possible interests and mutually fructifying possible collaborations that might be undertaken between members of the two groups relating not just to general philosophical issues but to specific movements, figures, or phenomena. I know, for instance, that some Polanyi scholars are interested in understanding and making sense of the manifold expressions and forms of mysticism.
4. Finally, is there any kind of organization and means of communication emerging among participatory turn scholars that interested Polanyians might tap into? On the other hand, participatory turn scholars could be apprised of the work carried on by the Polanyi Society, including our own email list, which is open to discussions of questions of the sort Sherman's paper has raised today. So also our journal, our annual society meetings, and our biannual national conference on Polanyi's thought are open to discussing issues like these.

ENDNOTE

¹Kyle Takaki, "Enactive Realism," *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* XXXVIII(1) (2011–2012): 43–59; Charles Lowney (with Florentien Vorhage), "Of One Mind: Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi on the Reduction of Mind to Body," unpublished manuscript, presented at the 2009 Polanyi Society Meeting in Montreal. Takaki traces his usage of "enactive" to the same original sources as does Sherman.

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