

# THE POLANYI SOCIETY

Vol. II, Number 2, Winter, 1980

## THE NUMBER OF POLANYI SOCIETY NEWSLETTERS

If you are wondering if you missed an issue, the Polanyi Society Newsletter in the Fall that carried the special invitation to the American Academy of Religion meeting honoring Professor Harry Prosch should have been labeled, Vol. VII, No. 1, Fall, 1979. This issue is the second one of this 1979-80 academic year. Please keep up your contributions of articles and of notes.

## ROYAL SOCIETY MEMOIR OF POLANYI

The BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS OF FELLOWS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY, volume 23, December, 1977, pp. 413-448 contains a compendious and excellent account of the life and work of Michael Polanyi, Fellow of the Royal Society. Written by E. P. Wigner and R.A. Hodgkin, the memoir is organized into seven parts: 1) Early Years, 2) Scientific Research, 3) Manchester University, 4) From Chemist to Philosopher, 5) A Philosophy of Discovery, 6) The Oxford Years, 7) Honorary Degrees, Special Lectures and Fellowships. The memoir also includes a bibliography of Polanyi's scientific papers and one of his social and philosophical writings. Written by two distinguished friends who grasped the depth and range of Polanyi's work, this record will provide not only a tribute but also a superfine summary for both Polanyi scholars and beginners in Polanyi studies. There is perspective here that will inform even the most advanced Polanyi scholars, and anyone who has tried to set forth in a brief compass the substance of Polanyi's life and thought will greatly admire the accomplishment of Wigner and Hodgkin.

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MEANING PRO AND CON

Harry Prosch, co-author with Polanyi, of MEANING has provided us with a selection of reviews of MEANING. Since we need to know how others see and interpret Polanyi's last book, I have made the following selection of affirmative and negative criticisms which will be of general interest, especially the references.

Allen, R. T. THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS, July, 1976, p. 283.  
Generally outlines the principal themes of the book, points out that it does not "provide a fully developed aesthetic theory . . . but a "vindication of art, along with the basic concern of mythology and religion, in a world dominated by reductivist scientism." ". . . the recent death of Michael Polanyi has robbed us of one of the most important thinkers of the age."

Collins, James, AMERICA, December, 1975.  
"These lectures render explicit and develop in detail Polanyi's reflections upon the spheres of art and myth, religion and social authority." "Because of this new perspective, the impression can be corrected that Polanyi's aims are primarily polemical . . ."

Cooper, Marilyn M., THE MINNESOTA DAILY, May 10, 1976, p. 10.  
Outlines the content of the book in about 3500 words and concludes that while Polanyi "fails to nail down his points conclusively" does provide "new viewpoints on many old problems."

Durka, Gloria, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, January/February, 1977.  
"There really are but a few contemporary philosophical thinkers who have made a significant impact on the thinking of Western people, and Michael Polanyi is sure to be counted among them." "What is so significant about the author's analysis is that he sees the creative ability of persons as the necessary and essential foundation of meaning. . . . Written on the day after Polanyi's death, this latest work is seen by this reviewer as a special legacy to the human enterprise."

Holbrook, David, BOOKS AND BOOKMEN, February, 1977, pp. 16-18.  
Without committing himself to traditional religious beliefs, Holbrook thinks that Polanyi has provided a new kind of philosophical anthropology that makes belief possible again. "That life moves toward meaning and values, and that our consciousness is itself a striving towards meanings and values, is (as Polanyi argues) a legitimate alternative to the dogged scientific belief that everything is simply 'matter in motion', operating by chance and necessity."

Innis, Robert E., THE JOURNAL OF RELIGION, October, 1977.  
"The central chapters expand radically the epistemological model that is Polanyi's principal contribution to philosophy." "In the present book the model is applied to crucial aspects of forms of knowing and experience outside of the realms of primary perception and of scientific and properly discursive knowing. The model is most effective and most original in the case of the analysis of metaphor and the structures of art works and aesthetic forms of consciousness." "The chapters on myth are interesting but mainly derivative from the work of Eliade, and the chapter on religion - while provocative - leaves many questions in abeyance."

Scott, Robert L., PHILOSOPHY AND RHETORIC, Vol. 10, No. Spring, 1977, pp. 123-25.  
" . . . should be of the greatest interest to rhetoricians." ". . . MEANING might well serve as a brilliant example of the embracing of a rhetorical mode in 'doing' philosophy."

Sites, Paul, SOCIOLOGY, vol. 3, No. 8, July, 1976.  
"This volume is a useful summary and extension of Polanyi's earlier ideas. It should be read by all scientists, particularly sociologists, who still question the truth and meaning value of art, poetry, and religion."

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Cohen, L. Jonathan, THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT (London), October 15, 1976.  
"Some philosophers seem to see themselves as physicians of human history. They diagnose their patient as suffering from a serious disease....They trace the disease's origins....The patient can be restored....by an appropriate draught of the right kind of philosophy. It is as easy as it is correct to criticize such thinkers....What is often more difficult is to separate the many valid insights that such a thinker, like Michael Polanyi, may nevertheless afford, from his rather less defensible framework of messianic diagnosis and prescription."

"Polanyi claimed that the progress of totalitarianism can be reversed by the revival of a proper regard for the element of moral commitment involved in scientific knowledge." "The recent demise of dictatorships in Portugal and Greece owes little to philosophical reform, and it is hardly credible that such reform could ever achieve much if it failed to coincide with favourable economic, political and military circumstances." "...if everyone in the world thought like Polanyi did, totalitarianism would vanish. But it does not follow from this that if every philosopher thought like Polanyi the same result would follow."

"But few professional philosophers will be satisfied with what Polanyi has to say about symbolic meaning. So many relevant questions can be asked that he makes no attempt to answer. Does another country's flag have the same symbolic meaning to us as its own nationality? Can a work of art symbolize different things to different people? If so, what becomes of the thesis that all meaning stems from some kind of social convention? Can a symbolism have a grammar, articulating its symbolic wholes into heterogeneous component elements that are combinable and recombinable in a diversity of structure? If so, are there universals of symbolic grammar, pervading human cultures? Can what is symbolized be true or false? If so, is every form of linguistic utterance - statements, commands, questions, promises, exclamations, etc. - in principle open to non-linguistic symbolization? And is the converse true also - can every mode of symbolic communication be given a linguistic translation? Or if not, why not? Does the uniqueness of a great artist lie in his invention of new symbolisms (like new languages) or only in the expression of new meanings (like hitherto unuttered sentences of an old language)? And what is to be said about the difficult cases - the patterned art forms that seem to symbolize nothing, or the fundamentalist religions that claim literal truth? Polanyi's style of writing skims over such questions as these in a way that will disappoint anyone accustomed to the standards of rigour, clarity and thoroughness to which the best contemporary Anglo-American philosophy conforms."

Seltser, Barry J., SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS, Vol. 37, No. 3, Fall, 1976, p. 279.  
"Michael Polanyi's earlier works have been devoted to a much needed but somewhat

overworked crusade for a recognition of 'personal knowledge' and an ending of the cult of objectivity in scientific inquiry." "Polanyi provides some excellent hints (none of which, sadly, are worked out in sufficient detail) of the differences between modern 'scientific' and earlier 'mythical' knowledge, and he is at his best when dispelling an all too-easy-exaltation of the former...." "The remainder of the book, however, far from providing a helpful context in which to view these observations, only succeeds in revealing the weaknesses of Polanyi's broader effort. Much of the discussion strikes the reader today as outdated.... Similarly, the central thesis of personal knowledge seems rather tame, in spite of the claim that it is a 'radical' step to 'incorporate' into our conception of scientific knowledge 'the part which we ourselves necessarily contribute in shaping such knowledge.'" "Moreover not only is much of the discussion outdated: one sees here an important (and unfortunate) aspect of Polanyi's approach to his world. The overestimation of his own contribution stems largely from a mind which seems to view reality in rigid dichotomies drawn from narrowly culturally-limited perspectives. He sees 'totalitarianism' as the evil confronting 'free society,' but nowhere are we provided with a satisfying understanding of this spectre. His constant references to Marx and Marxism are both misleading and frustrating: not only does he fail to distinguish adequately between Marx's thought and Stalin's excesses, but he lumps together Marxism and Fascism in a manner which cries out for careful analysis. A similarly unfortunate distinction occurs in his references to the need to bring science and the humanities together: just what are the humanities? One wonders where sociology fits into this discussion, if (as he suggests) science deals with facts and the humanities deal with values. His equation of 'objectivity' with 'amorality' (p.63) is thoroughly inappropriate for any social scientific approach which recognizes the choice of objectivity as a value-laden one.... (Polanyi seems oblivious of Max Weber's contributions to the nature of scientific inquiry.)" "Such unjustified distinctions lie...at the heart of Polanyi's inability to provide a program which goes beyond the realm of epistemological clarification." "Polanyi only reveals his failure to propose useful solutions or directions for further social progress. The difficulty is apparent in his fear of any sort of social planning and control (in the interest of the common good) over the pursuit of narrow group ideals; because we cannot completely control the future, we are urged not to try at all. Once again, an overdrawn dichotomy is set out: either attempt to control everything and become totalitarian, or leave the future to its own development...and allow each association to pursue its own ends." "Polanyi's conclusions provided little hope for extending his earlier progress in intellectual awareness into the more compelling realm of social life."

Sievert, Donald, PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH, September, 1978, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 142-43.

"It is to Polanyi's credit that he wrestles with one of the most important issues his view of meanings must confront: are meanings such that we may integrate them into a stock of truths about the world? That is, can such meanings be made a part of a procedure which yields truth? And if so, how is this possible? In broadest outline, his answer consists in appeal to the coherence of our beliefs. Coherence itself has a variety of aspects, not the least of which is intersubjective agreements (often, though not always, expressed by established authorities)." "Much of MEANING is devoted to extrapolating from this view features which can be employed in seeking truth, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, in aesthetics, ethics, and politics." "There is no question that in attending to such issues Polanyi focuses on perennial and significant philosophical issues. At the same time, I am not persuaded that he answers adequately skeptics and others to whom he is responding."

For example, the implication of the above passage (p. 63) is that it is inappropriate to raise skeptical objections against matters in faith. I question whether this is an answer to the skeptic in the sense of a solution to skeptical difficulties. Another reason I am not persuaded by what is said has to do with the style of the book." "Polanyi clearly writes retrospectively: he self-consciously relies on his previous work." "Another way of making the point is to say that the personal aspect of all epistemology is as much relied on as argued for in this book."

#### DISCUSSION WITH PROSCH AT AAR

The reception and discussion at the 1979 American Academy of Religion meeting that honored Prof. Harry Prosch provoked a lively discussion of MEANING. The chief issue that emerged was Polanyi's interpretation of religion. Prosch seemed to differ from a number of the members of the AAR in seeing Polanyi as having made a sharp and clear separation between meaning in science and meaning in works of the imagination, religion belonging to the latter. In the case of science, meaning bears upon realities that exist independently of the knower and consequently is subject to verification. In the case of art, myth, and religion meaning bears upon the integration of natural incompatibles that are sustained only by our continuing creation of them. Prosch pointed out that Polanyi had distinguished religion from the natural and supernatural by the term "transnatural." For this reason, Prosch does not believe that Polanyi conceived of the realities of religion as existing independently of us in a way continuous with or parallel to the realities of science. The realities of religion are truly works of our imagination. The reason for Polanyi's concern for traditional values was that they provide a framework within which these transnatural integrations can thrive and give us meaning. Again, Prosch was clear that he did not think that Polanyi saw in the transnatural what theologians conceive of as God. To put it philosophically, the realities of religion in Polanyi's thought do not have an ontological status.

The responses to Prosch claimed that this would mean a significant change in Polanyi's view as expressed earlier in PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE where it seems that religion, and its study by theology, is part of a continuum of forms of knowing that bear on reality. Prosch replied that there is continuity in the structure of knowing, namely reliance upon the subsidiary and focal dimensions of tacit knowing, but he did not think that Polanyi meant that the integration of particulars into wholes was the same ontologically for science as for religion.

A more thorough statement of Prosch's view can be found in his review of my book, THE WAY OF DISCOVERY, in ETHICS, Jan., 1979, pp. 211-16. Because of the importance of this issue on how Polanyi related tacit knowing to religion, the 1980 meeting of the AAR in Dallas will be a consultation on Polanyi's interpretation of religion. Dr. Phil Mullins, Department of Speech, Theater, and Humanities, Missouri Western State College will co-ordinate again, as he did for this meeting, the arrangements for the program.

#### CONNECTIONS AND NOTES

One of the primary aims of the Polanyi Society is to encourage and to support persons who are engaged in Polanyi studies or in allied projects. The following in alphabetical order are reports from persons doing a variety of Polanyi projects and you are encouraged to make connections with them and their work.

Dr. John Apczynski, Head of the Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University,

St. Bonaventure, New York 14778, has published an article, "Integrative Theology: A Polanyian Proposal for Theological Foundations" in THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, 40 (1979), pp. 23-43.

Mr. Alan J. Eade, doctoral candidate, Department of Political Science, the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland 21218, is doing a dissertation in political philosophy on "The Political Thought of Michael Polanyi."

Dr. Richard Gelwick, Head of the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Stephens College, Columbia, MO 65201, has published an article, "Post-critical Belief," in THE SOURCES OF HOPE, (ed.) Ross Fitzgerald, Elmsford, New York: Pergamon Press, 1979, pp. 124-43.

Dr. Benjamin Ladner, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, has been appointed Director of the National Humanities Faculty, offices at 1266 Main Street, Concord, MA, 01742

Dr. S. A. McWilliams, Department of Psychology, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona 85721, is examining psychologically the fundamental beliefs and tacit constructs upon which a scientist's knowledge is based. "The Psychology of Personal Constructs" is an approach to psychology which McWilliams finds very compatible with and complimentary to Polanyi's ideas. He would like to hear from anyone with relevant information or ideas.

Dr. David Rutledge, 1936 Sul Ross, Apt. #3, Houston, Texas 77098, now on the faculty of the University of Houston, was awarded the John W. Gardner prize at Rice University for the best dissertation in the Social Sciences and the Humanities in 1978-79. His dissertation now available from University Microfilms was on "The Recovery of the Person in the Post-Critical Thought of Michael Polanyi."

Dr. James W. Stines, Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina 28608, presented a paper at the American Academy of Religion meeting in New York on "Polanyi Studies and Ecology."

Dr. Louis H. Swartz, Associate Professor of Law and Social Work, John Lord O'Brian Hall, State University of NY at Buffalo, Buffalo, N.Y. 14260 is interested in finding anyone else who has worked on the implications or applications of Polanyi to law.

Dr. Sam Watson, Department of English, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, UNCC Station, Charlotte, NC 28223, and PS Co-ordinator of Communications and Rhetorical Studies is on the advisory board of PRE/TEXT: AN INTER-DISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF RHETORIC. In the Fall of 1980, he will be the guest editor of a special issue on Michael Polanyi.

#### POLANYI CONSULTATION IN DALLAS

Persons wishing to participate in the Polanyi Consultation at the American Academy of Religion meeting in Dallas, November 6-9, 1980, should contact Dr. Phil Mullins; Department of Speech, Theater, and Humanities; Missouri Western State College; 4525 Downs Dr.; St. Joseph, MO 64507; Telephone - 816-271-4200.

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