

Epistemology and the Human Sciences: Michael Polanyi's

Contribution to the Reshaping of Moral Theology.

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ABSTRACT Key Words: responsibility, freedom, personal knowledge, epistemology, participation, history, social sciences.

*This article shows how there is a great kinship between Polanyi's thought and that of Bernard Haring, "the father of modern moral theology" in the Roman Catholic Church. Haring advocated an ethics of personal responsibility that calls for an epistemology such as Polanyi developed for history and social sciences in **The Study of Man**.*

Michael Polanyi's thought, without his knowing it, has been reflected in the renewal of Catholic moral theology. There are remarkable similarities between Polanyi's struggle against totalitarianism and his mission to humanise scientific culture and the work of Bernard Haring, "the father of modern moral theology."

Bernard Haring¹ says his experiences as a medic in the German army on the Russian front during World War II "prepared me to work to overcome a one-sided ethic of obedience and to preach instead a morality of personal responsibility and brotherly love, with adherence to one's own sincere but ever searching conscience."² After the war he was professor of moral theology and sociology at the Redemptorist house of studies in Gars. There he wrote *The Law of Christ* which completely broke the pattern of casuistic thinking and introduced personalism into moral theology. The basic model of moral behaviour was no longer conformity to law but a personal response to the call of love from the other. It could be said that *The Law of Christ* changed the understanding of moral theology in the Catholic Church in a manner quite like the effect of *Personal Knowledge* on the community of scientists.

Haring was one of the three theological experts that Pope John XXIII personally chose and appointed to the Second Vatican Council. His contribution was mainly on the questions of the meaning of morality and religious freedom. His ideas and pastoral approach shine through the Council's document on *The Church in the Modern World*. One of his many achievements was to introduce the social sciences into moral theology as a methodology for reading the signs of the times. The Council ratified this stance. "In pastoral care appropriate use must be made ... of the findings of the secular sciences, especially of psychology and sociology."³ After the Council, he reformulated his thought in *Free and Faithful in Christ*, an update of *The Law of Christ* for a changing world. One can hear Polanyi's concerns ringing through this statement in *The Ethics of Manipulation*: "The ideology of the priority and supremacy of science and technology celebrates its feasts in classical Marxism but also in the western world."⁴

Haring never met Polanyi personally but came in contact with his thought through Abraham Maslow's recommendation of his philosophy of psychology and later through doctoral students at the Alphonsian Academy in Rome.⁵ Haring was particularly impressed by Maslow's claim about Polanyi's classic *Personal Knowledge*: "If you have not studied this book, you dare not consider yourself prepared for the next century."⁶ Haring often appealed

for an epistemology that would be liberating and healing. His Christian personalism was reinforced by Polanyi's humanistic approach to the sciences.

This essay presupposes a basic knowledge of Polanyi's post-critical philosophy and so will concentrate on his epistemology of the social sciences and how this impinges on ethics and morality through a new understanding of the person.

Polanyi's philosophy of science backs up Haring's charge against behaviourism that "Skinner and his most ardent followers frankly confess that freedom is nothing else than an illusion."⁷ Freedom is the very heart of commitment in Polanyi's conception of personal knowing. "It regards freedom as liberation from personal ends by submission to impersonal obligations." This freedom must always be enlightened by conscience in its search for those goods that rule over both individuals and the State. The person is released from individual selfish ends by submission to impersonal universal obligations.⁸

Father Haring waged a long struggle against the inroads of behaviourism into psychology and ethics.⁹ His insights are supported by Polanyi's understanding of the human mind. We cannot identify the mind with its exterior workings. That would be to fix attention on individual particulars without achieving a focal understanding of them as a comprehensive being. Polanyi evokes three closely reasoned arguments for the impracticability or practical contradiction of behaviourism. He proceeds phenomenologically from the observation of a person's face. Firstly, the particulars of the face observed in themselves are "meaningless." Secondly, they cannot be so observed since they are part of a physiognomy and apart from it remain unspecified; they are tacitly perceived when grasping it. Thirdly, it is impossible to trace the manifestations of the mind, "except by reading them as pointers to the mind from which they originate." What we know in the first place is the person whose mind as the centre of thought is revealed through his rational activities.

This insight illustrating the multiple operational principles functioning within the hierarchical ontological structure of the person throws light on human error, which has causes but not reasons.¹⁰ Responsibility represents the highest level of embodied personal existence. Every human commitment involves a limitation of our capacities and the possibility of failure.¹¹ "Everywhere the potential operations of a higher level are actualised by their embodiment in lower levels which make them liable to failure."¹² Responsible choices may be vitiated by a failure of commitment at any level, i.e., physical illness, mental disturbance or, at the level of personal responsibility, by moral evil. The limitations defined by the parameters of our embodied existence are but the opportunities offered for the realisation of our "cosmic vocation" in freedom.

We now turn to Polanyi's stance in face of the great debate that raged in Germany from the end of the last century and well into the twentieth and which still has reverberations today: namely, what are the origin and status of history and the social sciences? Are they a pure extension of the methods of the natural sciences into human affairs? Do they have their own proper matter distinct from the physical sciences? Can they live up to the ideal of scientific objectivity? Are there social facts that can be probed by a value-free epistemology? Polanyi's answer to these questions was already largely determined by his realisation that the ideal of pure scientific objectivity was impracticable in the natural sciences. It was destined to be even more so for the social sciences. They were as yet new and as it were still rather immature in their epistemological features. Their birth should represent not so much an emancipation or secession from the natural sciences as a liberation from a false ideal of "value-free science" so

that they might enjoy their own proper identity. Here is the source of Polanyi's original contribution to this discussion. He became familiar with its terms during his formative years in Hungary and was personally acquainted with Weber and many of its leading protagonists in Germany, being part of those intellectual circles where these questions were most actual. His exchanges with Karl Mannheim in England brought the same issues to the fore. Perhaps the most revealing lines that Polanyi wrote on this topic were his "Bibliographical Note" at the conclusion of *The Study of Man*. Here he takes exception to Collingwood's interpretation of "the secession of history from the domain of the natural sciences"¹³ and especially to how he treats Windelband, Rickert and Dilthey as the fountainhead of the anti-positivist theory of historical knowledge. He says they have been badly misrepresented. "Rickert does not **say** that the valuation of historical facts is a proper function of historiography. He says, on the contrary, and argues it in detail, that history **as a science** can merely identify acts deserving praise or blame, while strictly refraining from apportioning praise or blame." In line with this criticism while seemingly an admirer of Weber, he vigorously opposed the commonly accepted "doctrine of value-free science", which by foregoing all evaluation and limiting itself to description, undermines a free society and its institutions, by turning all moral and political commitments into mere facts about people's beliefs. Such a value-free social and political science is impossible of realisation for it denies that there is any successful or mistaken satisfaction of our normal standards.¹⁴ He notes further that Dilthey's contribution should be seen less from the perspective of the separation between methodologies of history and the sciences than from the perspective of the movements of phenomenology, existentialism, and Gestalt psychology which he helped inspire. Polanyi proceeds to delineate his own position as one that would develop these movements into a comprehensive understanding of both history and the social sciences in continuity with the natural sciences. He therefore refuses to be drawn on the question of the secession of history from the sciences. He claims it is unique as a discipline and yet enjoys continuity of epistemological method with the sciences.

He would seem to part company with Wolfhart Pannenberg in his classic *Epistemology and the Philosophy of Science*¹⁵ when he draws a line of discontinuity between the natural positive sciences and the hermeneutic social and human sciences. But is not Polanyi consistent with his theory of *Personal Knowledge* when he perceives just such personal and hermeneutic elements even in the natural sciences? In his preface to that volume he says,

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... the **personal participation** of the knower in all acts of understanding.¹⁶

If one follows Polanyi's thought through consistently, one discovers the idea of an open universe with man at its centre as its highest achievement. It is history that leads us into an understanding of man because it is history more than any other discipline that unveils the meaning of human decision, particularly those political decisions that have shaped the destiny of the human race. In the fourth and final part of his **magnum opus**, man is visualised as the pinnacle of evolution, creator of the noosphere through his cultural systems and intellectual frameworks. In such a hierarchical vision, there is a fundamental principle which Polanyi formulated as "the correspondence between the structure of comprehension and the structure of the comprehensive entity which is its object."¹⁷ This presumes a continuously graded sequence of sciences which correspond with the ever intensifying degrees of existence. History does involve unique personalities and unrepeatable events. It therefore transcends the universal features of the positive sciences by entering into, or, in Polanyi's terms, indwelling the personalities and decisions that have moulded

our destiny. Here are our heroes and saints whom we approach with reverence and respect. "They offer opportunity for intimate indwelling and for a systematic study of their individuality."¹⁸ The fact that history refers to a distinctive level of reality involves neither acceptance nor rejection of the secession of history from the sciences. The method of history passes from that of a personal observation of other objects to an encounter with another mind and thus to partaking in the existence of another person. Now the observer is logically related to the object of his science as a higher to a lower ontological level. When we come to the study of man however these levels unite as we begin to participate in the decisions of another person whom we willingly accept as a model; his standards become our standards:

The participation of the knower in the thing he knows increases steadily as the objects of knowledge ascend to ever higher levels of existence, and that, correspondingly, the observer also applies ever higher standards of appreciation to the things known by him. These two trends will combine to an ever more ample and also equal sharing of existence between the knower and the known, so that when we reach the point at which one man knows another man, the knower so fully dwells in that which he knows, that we can no longer place the two on different logical levels. This is to say that when we arrive at the contemplation of a human being as a responsible person, and we apply to him the same standards as we apply for ourselves, our knowledge of him has definitely lost the character of an observation and has become an encounter instead.¹⁹

Polanyi's approach to history and the human sciences may be summed up in a framework of respect whereby we assess the moral and political worth of persons and institutions. These judgements are based on our existential commitments, i.e., on our bodily, passionate, rational dwelling in society and its spiritual and cultural traditions. There are three ways of criticising human decisions that lead to three types of historical fallacies.²⁰ 1). By applying our standards without allowing for differences in the historical or real setting of the acting person. This is the straight jacket of a rationalist idea of immutable principles. 2). By judging others' past actions only by their past standards as distinct from our own. This sanctions conformity and makes any criticism of standards meaningless. 3). Judgements based on a materialist conception of man. Here all actions are seen as determined by impulses of power or profit so that human action is deprived of all moral meaning and directedness to ideals and obligations.²¹ Rationalism is overcome by admitting the biological and cultural embodiment of all free actions; relativism is overcome by acknowledging that every person has access to standards of truth and rightness, and determinism by commitment to personal knowledge as the seat and source of responsible choice.

Polanyi saw that unless we believe and trust our scientific theories we could never achieve understanding of their human meanings and purposes. Haring is full of awe before the achievements of the sciences. "The dedication and courage of our scientists awakens in us a sense of admiration and gratitude." Their conquests must be viewed in the horizon of destiny of the human person. "True humanity has to be constantly guarded and defended. We are a creature of many dimensions; and only by a radical commitment to the basic value of salvific knowledge, altruism, respect for every person's dignity and concern for life conditions that favour the growth of genuine freedom can we assure gradual progress in hominization."²²

ENDNOTES

1. The current article is largely taken from a larger study “Epistemology and the Human Sciences: Michael Polanyi’s Contribution to Moral Thought” prepared for a Festschrift published in German and presented to Haring on his eightieth birthday in November 1992.
2. *Embattled Witness: Memories of a Time of War*, Seabury Press, New York 1976, vii.
3. *Gaudium et Spes*, n.67.
4. *Ethics of Manipulation: Issues in Medicine, Behavior Control and Genetics*, Seabury Press, New York 1975, 39.
5. For example T.Kennedy C.Ss.R., *The Morality of Knowledge*, Rome 1979.
6. *Motivation and Personality*, New York 1970, 10n.
7. *Ethics of Manipulation*, 113.
8. *Personal Knowledge* , 214.
9. A typical example in *Ethics of Manipulation*, Seabury, New York 1975, 109-136 on “Behavior Modification” with a fierce refutation of B.F. Skinner.
10. Ibid. 91. Here there appear to be the beginnings of a natural law theory because “studies of rationality remain always rooted in an ancillary knowledge of causes operating on lower levels of reality”(p.93).
11. Karl Popper and the critical rationalist school have criticised Polanyi as being a subjectivist and as denying the fallibilist nature of scientific knowing. Andy F. Sanders has demonstrated that Polanyi is much closer to Popper than commonly thought and that his post-critical fiduciary philosophy has in no way denied the revisability of scientific propositions. See his *Michael Polanyi’s Post-Critical Epistemology*, Rodopoli, Amsterdam 1988, especially Chapters 5 and 6.
12. *The Study of Man*, 67.
13. Much of the following information is based on a talk by Prof. Klaus Allerbeck on “The Logic of *Personal Knowledge*” at the Centennial Commemorative Conference on Michael Polanyi, Budapest 24-26 August 1991. Prof. Allerbeck believes that Polanyi subscribed to a type of Weberian *Verantwortungsethik*. For Polanyi’s discussion, see *The Study of Man*, 100-102.
14. See Richard Allen’s *Polanyi*, Claridge Press, London 1990, 72-73, 78.

15. See Chapter Two which significantly for our argument treats the emancipation of the human from the natural sciences. *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1973.

16. *Personal Knowledge*, vii.

17. *The Tacit Dimension*, Doubleday, New York 1967, 33-34.

18. *The Study of Man*, 85.

19. Ibid. 94-94.

20. The underlying analogy with normative frameworks in animal behaviour should be noted. This leads to “a fourfold classification of deliberate choice” (ibid. 77).

21. Ibid. 87-89.

22. *Ethics of Manipulation*, 207 and 211. The author would like to thank Father Haring’s friend and colleague in the Alphonsian Academy, Father S. O’Riordan C.Ss.R. for his generous assistance in preparing this paper.