

An Introduction to “On the Modern Mind”

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In a July 10, 1964 letter to Sigmund Koch, Polanyi indicated that he had been invited to visit Bowdoin College on October 19, 1964; he hoped also to visit Koch in New York City when he made this trip to Brunswick, Maine.¹ Until recently, Koch had been a Duke University professor of psychology, and Polanyi was quite friendly with Koch during his 1964 Spring semester residency at Duke University, corresponding with him after returning to UK. But Koch had recently resigned his Duke position in order to become, in October, 1964, Director of the Program in the Humanities and Arts at the Ford Foundation. Polanyi had accepted an invitation from Eduard Pils, the chair of the Bowdoin College Philosophy Department, to deliver an October lecture to help celebrate the opening of the new Senior Center at Bowdoin College. The title of Polanyi’s Bowdoin College lecture was “On the Modern Mind.”

Drawing on William T. Scott’s later interview with Pils as well as Polanyi’s letters to Richard Gelwick and Sylvia Kind, William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., (*Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher*, Oxford: OUP 2005: 257) report that Pils read *Personal Knowledge* in 1964 when his own book *Recognition of Reason* was in press. He saw the similarity between his book’s philosophical perspective and that in Polanyi’s earlier book, and he added a late footnote pointing out this similarity. Pils had a copy of his book sent to Polanyi when it was published. When Polanyi eventually read Pils’ book, he too saw the similarity of perspectives. Pils’ invitation to Polanyi to lecture at Bowdoin apparently was the result of his enthusiasm for Polanyi’s philosophical ideas, but Polanyi’s Bowdoin College visit also had other important consequences.

Polanyi, Marjorie Grene and Pils later in the Fall of 1964—with considerable help from Sigmund Koch—began collaborating on a Ford Foundation project which was funded in

¹. Polanyi’s July 10, 1964 letter to Koch indicating he will go to Bowdoin on October 19, 1964 is included in the archival correspondence for Ford Foundation Grant 6500113 available at Rockefeller Archive Center, 15 Dayton Ave., Sleep Hollow, NY 10591.

January, 1965, and sponsored international conferences in 1965 and 1966 at the Senior Center at Bowdoin College. Polanyi, Grene, Pols and Koch were deeply involved in the work of the grant recipient, the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity (SGFCU), which put together these conferences. The SGFCU conferences ambitiously aimed to use Polanyi's thought as a vehicle to initiate a movement promoting a convergence in the thinking of selected important philosophers, scientists and artists who were critical of the cultural mainstream and, in particular, prevailing philosophical ideas about science. Polanyi, Grene, and Pols—apparently again with help from Koch—also later put together a successor Ford proposal for a much larger five-year funded program of the Study Group on the Unity of Knowledge (SGUK), which sponsored many academic conferences on a variety of different specific topics from 1967 to 1972. Polanyi was involved in only three of these later SGUK conferences, but some of his late philosophical interests and work grows out of topics examined in these later conferences.

Polanyi's "On the Modern Mind" provides a summary of both Polanyi's broad criticism of the dispositions of the modern mind and his prescription to realign these dispositions. In sum, Polanyi's October 1964 Bowdoin College lecture and Polanyi's ensuing good rapport with Edward Pols were contributing elements helping launch the Ford Foundation funded programs that Polanyi and others were involved in after his 1964 lecture. Polanyi's scholarly writing after 1964 is clearly connected with his involvement in these Ford Foundation projects.

"On the Modern Mind" was published in *Encounter* (24: 12-20) in May, 1965. A little more than a month after his Bowdoin lecture, a Polanyi letter of November 27, 1964 to his friend Sir Francis Walsh (Box 6, Folder 6, Michael Polanyi Papers, University of Chicago Library) advised him his essay would be published in *Encounter*. Polanyi anticipated "an uproar of responses" and invited Walsh to come to his defense. This essay was later republished as "Wider der Skepsis des modernen Denkens" in January, 1968 in *Gehört Gelesen* and is also included in Fred Schwartz (ed.), *Scientific Thought and Social Reality, Essays by Michael Polanyi* (*Psychological Issues*, v. 8, no.4, monograph 32, 1974: 131-149). "On the Modern Mind" is posted on the Polanyi Society web site for non-commercial use with the permission of Dr. John Polanyi, literary executor for Michael Polanyi.

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