

Michael Polanyi and Carl Rogers: A Dialogue

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Rogers: I think of myself as a practicing scientist, one who has worked some in the development of theory. But I'm also concerned about the application of such knowledge in practical settings.... [Rogers' voice fades for the announcer to talk over the participants for approximately two minutes. Then Rogers' voice returns:] Take as a very simple example, studies of delinquency. We could say with some assurance that a boy who comes from a broken home, who lives in a slum area, who's been rejected by his parents, and so on and so on — that that boy has a high probability of becoming a delinquent. Now, we tend to think about that almost as though the boy were an object. In much the same fashion, we would say, well, a steel ball rolling down a slope will proceed at a certain speed and at a certain acceleration; and I've engaged in research of that sort myself. I feel it has real usefulness. Yet, it troubles me very deeply that we leave out the boy; we leave out the *person*. I think that the rolling of the ball down the slope is perhaps inevitable, but the question of whether the boy becomes a delinquent — that's *not* an inevitable process. There's something in his subjective state that has to do with the question, as well as his external circumstances. In other words, I'm concerned that the behavioral sciences are tending to depersonalize the individual and I think often tending to cause people to feel that they are themselves robots, rather than individuals with spontaneity and the possibility of responsible action, and so on. And I wonder for myself what's the answer to that dilemma. I certainly would be interested in your reaction to that aspect of what science seems to be doing to people.

Polanyi: This is, of course, a most exciting question, and I do hope very much from you about this. I don't think we can elucidate it in this conversation, but at least I think I can bring in something which is burning in me at this moment, which has a bearing on it — and also, I think, the seriousness of it. I have just written, in the last few hours I should say, an introduction to a book which will commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution; and I realized when I tried to describe what happened, how little it is known what was the actual starting point of it. It was a meeting of writers, of Communist writers. One can't repeat that often enough. These were Party members, Communist writers. And in that meeting there occurred a rebellion against the official leadership in which these people claimed, "We are the Party, and we reject the view which you are imposing on us." Now, what was that view? The view was that the minds of people, the thoughts of people, are superstructures of the economic process; and since the Party controls the socialistic economic process, the thoughts are under the necessary control of the Party, and properly so; and what the audience — these formerly fanatical young writers — claimed was that that is not true: that the truth, and the thought which elucidates the truth, must be an independent factor in public life and not a servant of the government. It is not defined by being useful to the government but has intrinsic power and intrinsic justification.

Now, what did *we* do about that? That is my point. These people proclaimed this. It was written up — I remember writing about it at that time as the "revolution of truth," but I was not an official voice (as not at this moment, I'm sure). But I picked up a journal published two years ago — one of the most distinguished

journals in the English language — to which one of the most authoritative voices of the academic life in America concerned with the study of Soviet affairs gave account of an article which he had written four years earlier, 1960. In this article which he wrote, he had said that the events in the Soviet Union are largely a rebellion in favor of the truth — a fighting for the truth. But when he showed to manuscript to his friends in the great university where he is functioning, they advised him against it. They said, "This is a naive and unscientific way of looking at things." And so, he crossed it out. Now he says he regrets it: there is something in it — he thinks that there was. And then he explains — and we'll not go into that — why, for the Soviet writers, it was justified to talk about the truth, and so on and so forth — this is a very complicated business).

But what it actually amounts to is that all along — all during these ten years and in fact all along the revival of free thought in the Soviet Union — we have interpreted it in our universities, in our press, in broadcasting and interviews in broadcasting — this event as due to changes in the industrial structure; in the fact that their more complicated economic system had been set up which required the different values and so on and so forth. Now, instead of welcoming this liberation of the human mind — this liberation which really is a confirmation of our ideas — we did our best to play it down; to interpret it in the same kind of mechanistic terms against which they rebelled there and from which they liberated themselves. That is the situation in which are, because this a very characteristic event.

Rogers: Well, it certainly fascinates me to think of it in terms of the Soviet Union as well as our own culture. And I guess I feel that certainly in our own culture there is gradually growing a revolt, at some deep inner level, against the individual seeing himself as purely the product — whether of strictly determined psychological forces, or economic forces, or cultural forces, or what not — I think that men in various ways are rebelling against that and saying, "I exist; I exist as a person; I do make a difference." In some way, we've got to incorporate this newer view into our view of *science*. At least that's the way it seems to me.

Polanyi: Yes, of course. Now first of all, let me say that I am delighted to hear what you say, because for the first time somebody supports me in the view that what is happening in the Soviet Union today — and the great changes which are taking place there now for, let's say, at least ten years and more — are similar to the changes which are taking place here for similar reasons; for the unsatisfactory nature of the same mechanistic conception of man eliminates the responsibility of man, doesn't have a place for it, and which has no place for the autonomous, intrinsic powers of thought in general — not only responsibility but the whole of our actions as thinking and creative individuals — has no place in the scope of this interpretation. And I think that as to science, I again think that we must first of all have a pretty good and new idea about knowledge in general, and then we can come to science and put it right. But in the first place, I think we must have a clear mechanism, and that is, at any rate, what I was trying to establish. A mechanism which, without obscurity and without forcing the issue or the conclusions, brings us a way of seeing — a necessary and adequate way of seeing — which does not reduce man to an aggregate of atoms, nor even to a mechanism, but gives us, straight away, access to him as a person; and when we have that, we can, I think, move on a fairly large scale from man to other things, and also to history.

Rogers: I'm particularly impressed with the distinction you draw between knowledge as the larger field, and science. It perhaps bears on one item that has been a very real puzzle to me. As you know, I'm a therapist, a counselor, and the

majority of my life has been given over to working with individuals who are in some sort of personal or psychological distress. I certainly feel I have been able to be of help to some of them, and if I ask myself what has been the real element which has been helpful, it would seem to be the intimate, close, mutual, subjective relationship — something very similar to what Buber describes in the “I-Thou” relationship. It’s that personal experience of relationship that seems to be the element that brings about change, and yet, when when I have tried to do research in psychotherapy — you can study the way in which the verbal behavior changes, you can study the changes in the person’s way of perceiving himself, you can study the way his friends perceive him, the changes in such perceptions — you can study all kinds of external cues, and yet you can never — so far as I can see — can never get to the really essential experience which brought about change. Now, I relate that to what you’re saying by thinking that, well, perhaps that must remain a part of our knowledge but cannot be a part of our science. I don’t know.

Polanyi: I think something of that kind, yes. Perhaps I should make it even clearer. I know how unusual this view is, but I have expressed it, oh, just about ten years ago, actually. I published in *Science* a piece which was actually the text of an address, and there I suggested that we should forget for ten years about the word “scientific.” If we could only get away from that, we would see so many possibilities of appreciating knowledge — of appreciating views and explorations, and we’d call them penetrating, revealing, sensitive, true — true, yes, we would call them true — and it’s quite an obvious way of describing them. So let’s forget about “science,” that is my suggestion. Even then, “science” itself misdescribes it, in my opinion, very badly; and therefore, when we bring in “science,” we usually don’t even bring in science, but we bring the misdescription of science of itself. Now, nothing could be more out of the way and less useful.

Rogers: That’s very interesting indeed, because to hear someone like you, with such solid scientific training, speak of sort of laying aside the term “science” for the time being, I realize I have approached that some problem, perhaps, in a somewhat different way. It has seemed to me that we must enlarge the conception of science to include all kinds of things that currently people leave out of it. For example, I think that the creative intuitions — those are usually thought of as having no part in science and yet, to my way of thinking, they’re one of the central parts of real science — and I don’t know which road is better: to try to include a great deal of the subjective, intuitive, phenomenological in science, or whether — you seem to be saying — let’s reserve the term “science” for the operations that people usually think of in doing science, and concentrate on knowledge as a larger sphere.

Polanyi: Yes, let us not attribute particular merit to something by saying, “This is scientific.” Let’s describe its value and its reliability, its penetration and so many other terms; and the example which you mention is very much to the point; namely, creativity. Now, this is one of the objects which leads a very precarious existence because the supposed methods of science cannot deal with it; they can’t do anything about it. And therefore, the theory which science makes of itself tries to exclude it. It says, “Oh, this is just psychology or sociology or something which doesn’t belong to us. It’s not logic.” I think that all this is unnecessary and actually misleading.

Rogers: I wonder if it would be too large a question to ask, “What is your view of science? How do you see science as separate from this larger sphere of knowledge?”

Polanyi: I think that there are *forms* of science. As you probably know, I think that certain forms of science, like the behaviorist psychology, are actually corrupted — impaired, to put it a little less rudely — impaired by harking back to the alleged, supposed methods of science. So this is probably fairly widespread. I think in sociology you have similar influences. You see sociologists claiming that they can describe — in fact, account for and explain — all human activities in society without being concerned with right or wrong. Now, I think that's quite absurd, because it's quite obvious that the sociologists themselves probably can't explain their own actions without considering that which they thought was right or wrong. Why should that be different for others whom they are describing, whom they are explaining? And at this moment, there are great issues involved — and have been for the last few years in the United States while I was visiting here — which many people were moved, very effectively, by questions of right and wrong. So, if there were no differences between right and wrong, these would be just illusory claims which they would be making. Obviously, this is completely degrading what is going on. And so one could go on: one could speak of the description, the explanation of contemporary affairs, of which I have spoken right at the beginning, which is part of our way of writing history. It has not always been the case. In the eighteenth century people wrote history, and the great historians of that time believed that it was something which was leading to progress through enlightenment; and leading to disasters, to errors or to follies. In other words, human beings, as we know them, still existed as agents in history — as responsible agents in history — responsible for the improvement of the human condition and also responsible for disasters.

Rogers: Well, I like your bringing in the right and wrong issue; it seems to me that many behavioral scientists today are fearful of that kind of issue. I have a pipe dream which would really revolve around an initial, ethical decision. It seems to me, for example, that there is building up in the behavioral sciences some knowledge of how to deal with interpersonal tensions, and tensions that exist between groups. It seems to me that as behavioral scientists, we have an ethical responsibility to try to use that knowledge in ways that might be effective in helping the present racial and national and international situations. I've sometimes dreamed of sort of an interdisciplinary Manhattan Project for the reduction of psychological tension — where you could get together the best minds, the best knowledge in this field and begin to utilize it both ethically and, I hope, effectively in resolving some of the world tensions. Now this is a little different emphasis than what you were giving it, but it seems to me to fit in there; that unless scientists regard themselves as having an ethical responsibility, they are not likely to engage in some activities that might have social usefulness.

Polanyi: Yes, they actually missed, I think, the essence of most of the things which are important in the world by doing so. But I'm not sure that I quite follow you about first observing tension, and then dealing with it from the moral point of view. I think that the study of tensions as such is already tainted by a neutrality which is misleading; you see, because the moment you apply the reduction of tension to places — let's say you are dealing with the revolutionary movements of the underground against Hitler — well, you surely are not in favor of reducing tensions there, but on the contrary, of increasing tension. So that these terms — colorless or neutral terms — have already a tendency to mislead and to curtail our scope. And perhaps it's difficult to then bring in, in succession to this, the moral point of view. But, of course, I'm rather skeptical about the difficulties: I see them as very great. And I'm very anxious to hear more about it, what hopes you have....

Rogers: Well, I think that — I would agree with the point you've made that just reduction of tensions itself would not necessarily in all situations be even an ethical goal. And I suppose what we do know — we do have the kind of skills that can operate to produce more constructive harmony in groups that are very much in opposition to each other. Now, I can see ways in which that knowledge might be used in a neutral or not very responsible fashion. I guess what you're driving me back to is the realization that at the basis of anything that a scientist undertakes is, first of all, an ethical and moral value judgment that he makes.

Polanyi: The value judgments are ubiquitous — they are ubiquitous even in the exact sciences, but one can forget about them there, perhaps; if one wants to, they need not be acknowledged at this moment. But I think that the kind of thing which I was talking about right at the beginning, namely, to secure the possibility of an authentic image and interpretation of man — of living beings, of man and of the universe — is first of all to be continuously involved in value judgments. Now, that I think is something which of course is today frowned upon and that we must break down; but it is not easy going from there on, either. So it is a very big task. It is almost a task of building up, in some respects, a new culture in opposition to 300 years of brilliant progress achieved by another method: by the method of reducing things to elements which are inadequate.

Rogers: I've always realized that your thinking was revolutionary in its scope, but I guess I never realized quite how much that's true, because really to achieve the kind of thing you're talking about right now would mean a drastic alteration in point of view, not only on the part of scientists, but on the part of a culture which supports science.

Polanyi: I think that is true; but of course I would think that we are supported by a movement which has been going on for some time. I think it has been going on — well, Kierkegaard we talked about previously and we could have talked about Dostoyevsky; we could have talked about a number of philosophers who, toward the end of the nineteenth century, have started movements which now are becoming popular here, like the phenomenological movement. I think that all this is one great effort of changing course in philosophy. Unfortunately, I think, English and American philosophy, which was inspired by other ideas, did not contribute to this.... [Voices fade out under closing announcement.]