

A Note on a Passage from Polanyi's *Science, Faith and Society**

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In the Appendix to *Science, Faith and Society*, Michael Polanyi states the following: "Apart from meaningless sense impressions there is no experience that abides as a 'fact' without an element of valid interpretation having been imparted to it."¹ He then adds, "This is true even of facts of everyday life, the nature of which depends on the accepted interpretation of events—whether magical, astrological, mythological, naturalistic, etc." (89). There is much in these two sentences that commands our attention.

Preliminary Ruminations

The first thing to notice here is that "meaningless sense impressions" constitute an experience. Further, Polanyi's initial statement indicates that a meaningless sense impression is capable of abiding (i.e., continuing or enduring) "as a 'fact'." Note, too, that this fact continues or endures as an experience. (And, indeed, how else could it continue or endure?) The abiding of experience, it would seem, occurs in the moment as well as in one's memory, the exercise of which permits (some degree of) replication of the moment.

Also worth noting (looking now at both sentences) is that while at first glance the setting appears rather simple—the world consists of events that through interpretation are transformed into facts—matters upon reflection are actually considerably more complicated. Some events (which, of course, must be experienced in order to be present to mind) are interpreted and some events ("meaningless sense impressions") are not. Interpreted events are facts, but so too are "meaningless sense impressions." And, since "meaningless sense impressions" are a fact, so too, it would appear, are events more generally. Polanyi's reference to "facts of everyday life" reminds us that interpreted events are more common than those that are not: "meaningless sense impressions" are comparatively rare.

It would seem that it is the absence of interpretation that makes such sense impressions meaningless. It would also seem that where meaning *does* exist, that is attributable to interpretation, and where there is meaning, "event" and interpretation are coincidental: the latter is a necessary condition for affirmation of the former (thereby giving rise to a fact). The essential character of a meaningful event is to be *seen as* or *understood as*. In Polanyi's reference to the "theory of the burglar" (22-24), the noise awakening us in the night is either the wind, a rat, or a burglar rummaging in the house. (It may turn out to be something else, yet to be determined, but the very fact that the noise is noticed requires that we understand it is as *something*.) Were we not to regard interpretation and event as a single phenomenon, we would be faced with potentially insuperable difficulties such as: "What is this 'event' in the absence of its interpretation?" "In what sense can it be identified and thereby said to exist?" "How can it even be coherently spoken of?"

But even with this proviso a difficulty remains: If meaningful event is inseparable from interpretation, why speak of "event" at all, and why regard it as a distinct experience? Perhaps we should instead heed Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* (pp. 28-30 & 252-257) where he demonstrates that "*P* is true" (where *p* is a claim about the world) is an asseveration of and

* This essay benefitted from a careful reading of a preliminary draft and penetrating comments upon it by Collin Barnes and Timothy Simpson.

commitment to p (i.e., a fiduciary act) as opposed to a subsequent additional assertion about the world. Following Polanyi's lead, then, rather than speaking of a fact being the meaningful result of an interpretation of an event, it would be simpler and less misleading simply to assert, and thereby affirm, p (that is, the fact). Since interpretation is logically implicit in the meaningful claim (that X is a fact), why continue to speak of interpretation at all? Well, one answer is that this constitutes a reminder that for Polanyi some experience (viz., "meaningless sense impressions") is *not* interpreted. (But what if these impressions, even in their meaninglessness, also are the product of interpretation?)

Before moving more deeply into the epistemological intricacies prompted by these initial observations, it is fitting that we take a moment to mark Polanyi's purpose in writing the cited passages. His primary claim—one that is familiar to his attentive readers—is that grasping reality is unavoidably an instance of interpretation and judgment (and hence that knowing is necessarily "personal," the paradigmatic Polanyian account of which is the triad of 1) tacit clues being integrated by 2) an active intelligence into 3) a focal and explicit result).² We might say that uninterpreted meaningful events is a null set. But if meaningful events are inseparable from interpretation, to state this is idle.

Below and Beyond

We have in our preliminary ruminations made some sense of Polanyi's interpreted (i.e., meaningful) events. But what are we to make of the "meaningless sense impressions," which, after all, also constitute both an event and a fact? In order to be coherently spoken of, such impressions are necessarily present to mind as an experience. What are the features of that experience?

To set the table for pursuit of this question, let us dwell for a moment on the meaning and role of interpretation in Polanyi's account. His reference to the now-abandoned Newtonian understanding of the residue of evaporation as evidence that water has been transmuted into earth (*SFS*, 89) reveals two instances of interpretation. The first of these, an understanding that contemporary science cannot countenance, is Newton's view that the visible residue (replicable at will) is the result of transmutation. But there is also an interpretation shared by Newton, Polanyi, and contemporary science, namely, that after evaporation *something* remains in the glass *and* that this is the residue of the now-absent water. This second interpretation constitutes an experience shared by Newton and contemporary authority while the first reveals conflicting and hence unshared experiences on the part of Newton and contemporary authority, respectively. This in turn highlights a troubling question: Newton and contemporary science have differing experience, but differing experience of what? It would seem that the answer is "the residue." But the character or nature of the residue is precisely what is in dispute. Our question thus leads to a familiar yet enduringly significant problem that possesses two dimensions: 1) What authority, in principle, is available to establish one interpretation as superior to the other?; and 2) What is the epistemological ground of *that*?

These questions have been addressed, albeit provisionally, elsewhere.³ A memorable feature of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* is the fascinating account of the impressive stability of belief found in the Azande people of Africa.⁴ In contrast to Polanyi's naturalistic understanding of the world, the Azande possess what, for Polanyi, is a magical view. Polanyi emphasizes,

however, that the two perspectives—the naturalistic and the magical—are equally stable and employ similar devices to maintain that stability and the concomitant coherence. Yet, Polanyi asserts, the Zande magical perspective is erroneous and his own naturalistic perspective is not. In order to account for this strange marriage of respect and disdain for the Zande understanding of the world, it is necessary to posit two distinct and contrasting conceptions of coherence, viz., “coherence₁” and “coherence₂.”

The Azande offer an instance of coherence₁. What makes Polanyi’s rejection of the Zande framework possible is the influence of coherence₂. The primary reason Polanyi cites the Azande is that their stability of belief so clearly illuminates the character of all comprehensive frameworks, *including the naturalistic framework*. In its parallel stability of belief, the naturalistic framework and the world it sustains is also an instance of coherence₁. What, then, is this coherence₂ that we are suggesting underlies Polanyi’s criticism of the Azande? And from what is it derived?

The answer is that coherence₂ is coherence₁ as it is exercised personally in the form of the ongoing inferences and judgments (including acts of knowing) that constitute one’s active being in the world. Although Polanyi does not employ this nomenclature, he precisely describes “coherence₂”: “The attribution of truth to any particular stable alternative is a fiduciary act which cannot be analysed in non-committal terms” (*PK*, 294).⁵ In his role as an epistemological theorist, Polanyi notes the variety of instances of coherence₁. (But even in doing this—in making, with the intention of universal validity, affirmations about the world—he is manifesting a commitment that betrays confident occupation of coherence₂.) Then, when Polanyi opts to speak conscientiously regarding what is in fact real and true, he must have recourse to his own knowledge and experience. Judging on the basis of (fiduciary) coherence₂, he finds the Zande world clearly deficient.

When, therefore, Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* states that coherence is an inadequate criterion of truth,⁶ he is speaking as an observer of instances of coherence₁, and the missing factor responsible for this negative assessment is the difference between (theorizing about) coherence₁ and (personally affirming) coherence₂. Two important implications immediately follow. First, were coherence in both senses inadequate, to say so would be a case of performative contradiction. This is because the assertion of inadequacy rests upon a judgment dependent on commitment to the coherent sustaining framework (made possible by coherence₂). In saying that coherence₁ is inadequate, Polanyi is necessarily simultaneously affirming that coherence₂ is not. Second, if all we recognize in Polanyi’s position is an assertion of the existence of multiple incommensurate frameworks (instances of coherence₁), we would justifiably view him as endorsing epistemological relativism. But this is precisely the opposite of what Polanyi is saying. The Azande, asserts Polanyi, are wrong.⁷ So are innumerable other points of view. Does this mean that any position other than Polanyi’s (or one’s own) is wrong? No: it is, rather, to say that another point of view is wrong if it conflicts with confident and principled occupation of coherence₂.⁸ One can at this point discern an animated objection: Can mere “confident and principled occupation” be the final arbiter? In response, we must ask, “Compared to what?”. The essential point is that there is in principle no possibility of appeal to anything more authoritative than coherence₂. Even our evaluation of coherence₂ as the central element in our conception of justification is itself subject to the authority of coherence₂.

Polanyi invites us to understand that circularity and the abandonment of any trace of foundationalism is the price imposed by performative consistency.

Polanyi's epistemology establishes the common features of all frameworks and then addresses the eminently practical question of "Okay, what now?" The answer is to recognize the necessity and legitimacy of conscientiously cultivating and embracing coherence². This consists of the ongoing principled accumulation (and revision) of knowledge. Knowing is a fiduciary commitment, and it is always possible that in our claim to know we may be wrong. This hazard is unavoidable.⁹ But to be alive is to judge. And, in judging, we can rely on only the resources we find ourselves possessing. One should honor one's principles and act accordingly. Such resources can and do mature and grow. But doing even better than honoring one's principles is a chimera.

So, what of the two-dimensional problem noted above? First, it is our existing coherent understanding, an understanding that is largely the product of tradition (including initiation, apprenticeship, etc.—and, above all, the acquisition of language) as well as the impact of relevant surrounding authorities, that provides the grounds for deeming one interpretation as superior to another.¹⁰ As Polanyi states, "Our most deeply ingrained convictions are determined by the idiom in which we interpret our experience and in terms of which we erect our articulate systems. Our formally declared beliefs can be held to be true in the last resort only because of our logically anterior [personal] acceptance of a particular set of terms, from which all the references to reality are constructed" (PK, 287). And, second, the epistemological ground for this in the final analysis is the personal, i.e., what Polanyi calls "the unspecifiable personal coefficient" (PK, 250). We thus encounter what, for Polanyi, is the central theme of his book: "I have tried to demonstrate that into every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection, but a necessary component of all knowledge" (PK, 312; cf. viii). Polanyi usefully adds, "Every factual statement embodies some measure of responsible judgment as the personal pole of the commitment in which it is affirmed" (312) and observes that it is "the framework of commitment" that "allows us to commit ourselves on evidence which *but for the weight of our personal judgment*, would admit of other conclusions" (312; emphasis added). Further, addressing the question of justification of assertion regarding the real and true, Polanyi notes that "[o]nly this manner of adopting the fiduciary mode is consonant with itself: the decision to do so must be admitted to be itself in the nature of a fiduciary act" (256). Justification in the end reduces to trust in trust and commitment to commitment. As Polanyi with remarkable candor and consistency states,

...in so far as I express my utmost understanding of my intellectual responsibilities as my own personal belief, I may rest assured of having fulfilled the ultimate requirements of self-criticism; that indeed I am obliged to form such personal beliefs and can hold them in a responsible manner, even though I recognize that such a claim *can have no other justification than such as it derives from being declared in the very terms which it endorses...*(299; emphasis added; cf. viii).¹¹

These striking statements clarify what interpretation, and thereby affirmation of the real, can and do (and cannot and do not) mean.

The table having been set, let us now articulate the thesis of these remarks, namely, that Polanyi's "meaningless sense impressions" are as much the product of personal judgment (grounded in the confident assertion that is coherence₂) as are the interpreted events that give rise to meaning. Or, to phrase the point somewhat differently, the judgment of meaninglessness is itself an assertion rooted in the fiduciary. That the "meaningless sense impressions" can be spoken of at all reveals that they are the fruit of interpretation and judgment. This is necessary in order for them to be present to mind, i.e., for them to constitute an experience. In short, no experience is meaningless. Nor can it be. "Meaninglessness" is a meaningful attribution. And in such meaning we find the function of that designation.

If the experience of meaninglessness is the product of interpretation and judgment (and is thereby meaningful), then it shares the features of meaningful experience outlined at the outset. There are "event" and interpretation, and these are coincidental. All experience, even that of meaninglessness, is an instance of *seeing as* or *understanding as*. And, rather than speaking of a fact being the result of an interpretation of an event, we ought—in the case of meaninglessness as well as that of meaning—simply assert and affirm the fact. This is true of meaninglessness because the assertion of such is itself meaningful.

Concluding Thoughts

What, then, is it that Polanyi should have instead said in the Appendix to *Science, Faith and Society*? On the basis of his own analysis (most notably in *Personal Knowledge*), he ought to have acknowledged that *all* experience is the result of interpretation and judgment. Exercise of the personal, which is to say, assumption of the fiduciary mode, is entailed by awareness itself. While novelty in understanding is assuredly possible and manifestly does occur, even the unprecedented, for its coherence and meaning, depends on the contribution of a framework already in place. Even in the most dramatic instances of "breaking out"¹² (i.e., transcending a familiar and comfortable intellectual dwelling place) we remain subservient to a personally-mediated pre-existing context that is the residue of prior experience. The measure of subservience varies and so too does the degree of discovery. But there would be no experience at all were we (impossible to imagine) to encounter the entirely "other." This is because there would be no possibility of connection to it (and hence no experience of it) by the person in question.

These consequences are among those that follow if we take Polanyi "straight up." By this liquorish metaphor we are, ironically, referring to an eminently sober appreciation of the implications of Polanyi's performatively consistent postcritical emphasis on the personal, not only for the phenomenon of knowing but also for our understanding of truth and the meaning of reality. What this portends, for those willing and able to entertain it, is strikingly set forth, rather in passing, in *Personal Knowledge*: "If man died, his undeciphered script would convey nothing. Seen in the round, man stands at the beginning and at the end, as begetter and child of his own thought." Polanyi then immediately poses a question: "Is he speaking to himself in a language he alone can understand?" (265). The book, above all in its treatment of justification, is Polanyi's response in the affirmative. Recognition of the role of the personal "eliminated any formal distinction between statements of belief and statements of fact" (299-300) and decision and commitment (an exercise of the personal) posits a largely "hidden reality" (311) and establishes one's calling (and that of mankind generally) indefinitely to discover more about it.

In this manner, man finds meaning by writing and then reading a script of his own making. In this postcritical vista, each of us—because we are individual agents as well as participants in and heirs to a “great spectacle” (389 & 401)—both is and is not alone and on his own.

No experience “abides as a ‘fact’ without an element of valid interpretation having been imparted to it”? True, indeed. But this requirement pertains as much to meaningless sense impressions as it does to any other event in the world.

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¹ Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964 [first published in 1946]), 89.

² See, for example, Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974 [first published in 1958]), vii.

³ See Jon Fennell, “Everyone a Sailor: Oakeshott’s Affinity for the Polanyian Vision of Human Activity,” in *Tradition and Discovery*, Volume 51, 000-000, at 000.

⁴ *Personal Knowledge*, 287-294.

⁵ Significantly, Polanyi adds, “there exists no principle of doubt the operation of which will discover for us which of two systems of implicit beliefs is true except in the sense that we will admit decisive evidence against the one we do not believe to be true, and not against the other” (*Personal Knowledge*, 294).

⁶ *Personal Knowledge*, 294.

⁷ In a personal communication, Dale Cannon, a first-tier Polanyian scholar, states, “To claim, as Polanyi does, that the Zande understanding of things is wrong is not merely to state his rejection of it, his disbelief in it, and his affirmation of the modern, scientific, naturalist view to the contrary; it is also to deny that it [the Zande understanding] is neither generated from nor, appeals to as its ground, a truly personal groping-personal-apprehension of reality (as an opening onto reality transcending itself), and therefore that it [the Zande understanding] is not open to or subject to modification in the direction of a more universally valid conception via personal knowing in the way that the modern, scientific, naturalist view (upon Polanyi’s account) is.” Cannon is correct in noting that the Zande perspective is ineligible for Polanyi’s personal affirmation (and the associated attribution of reality). But Polanyi would not say that the Zande view is incapable of receiving the Zande personal affirmation of it. Cannon then adds, “Remember, in this connection that the reality claimed to be known by modern, scientific knowing according to Polanyi is a *commitment target of personal knowing*. The Zande conception is not claimed by the people who believe it to be so produced, nor to be so modifiable via personal knowing (and encounters with other personal knowings) as life goes on. The Zande’s understanding of reality is thus not conceived by them to be a commitment target of authentic personal knowing. The Zande conception is not claimed by the people who believe it to be so produced, or authentically to be so modified as life goes on.” In response we should note that what the Azande *conceive* as commitment is irrelevant to Polanyi’s point (about stability of belief and comparable instances of coherence₁). The Azande *are* committed, whether they conceive of this commitment or not (and it is scarcely credible that they do). Granted, Polanyi’s view of reality is superior to that of the Azande. But the two views are equally coherent₁. That precisely is Polanyi’s point. The additional insightful gloss on Polanyi that is offered here by Cannon is what makes Polanyi’s view an instance of coherence₂.

⁸ We should expect that those with a domineering appetite for something presumably more substantive will not be satisfied with this account.

⁹ Cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 250-251.

¹⁰ See *Personal Knowledge*, 322: “we are creatures of circumstance...Our believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging. And this reliance on the cultural machinery of our society continues through life.” Later, on the

same page, Polanyi adds, "I accept these accidents of personal existence as the concrete opportunities for exercising our personal responsibility. *This acceptance is the sense of my calling.*"

¹¹ See, too, this sentence from what is arguably the most important page in the book: "Commitment offers to those who accept it legitimate grounds for the affirmation of personal convictions with universal intent" (324). Earlier on this page, Polanyi has stated, "my belief in commitment is a commitment of the very kind that it authorizes; therefore, if its justification be questioned, it finds confirmation in itself."

¹² *Personal Knowledge*, 195-202.