

Chapter 5

Madness and the Moral Inversion

Abstract: Madness and the Moral Inversion - The post-critical epistemology of Michael Polanyi derives from a political problem he saw in the way Soviet policy undermined a moral outlook. He identifies a moral inversion when unacknowledged moral passions are coupled with a purported "objective" view of reality, which he identifies as a "dynamo-objective coupling." Moral inversion provides cover for a false view of reality in that any criticism of its purported claims is met with a passionate moral objection, while any counter to the false morality is met with an alternative reality. Polanyi's philosophy derives from a scientist's reflection on the process of scientific discovery, not from an abstract or idealized account of science's claims to reality. He points out that science is based on a tacit understanding of reality and that the scientist does not work from an objective point outside the world, but rather works within a community of knowers seeking the truth. Polanyi suggests that all declarative sentences should begin with the words "I believe that . . ." to remind ourselves of our personal commitment to that which we claim to know. . . 178

Interlude: The Roiling Stones

In the last chapter, we looked at journalism and news media as a potential source of truth and hence understanding reality. Ethical journalists commit themselves to a careful search for truth, but news media, social media and AI are all prone to both misinformation and disinformation, which can pervert our understanding of reality. In this chapter we look to science as a potentially reliable source of truth and understanding of reality and specifically at Michael Polanyi's post-critical philosophy.

Our definition of madness, understood metaphorically, not only as the inability to distinguish reality from non-reality, but also the *unwillingness* to distinguish reality from non-reality, begs a more profound question: *What is reality?* On its surface, this may seem a simple enough question. Reality is what we perceive it to be, or reality is what we believe it to be. Or even reality is what we want it to be! Reality has philosophical, ethical, and political dimensions. Reality is not merely a task for reason, but also must account for emotions that drive our perceptions of reality.

The interpretation of reality is also socially constructed. Scientists depend on “consensual validation”, the criteria of experts employing controlled studies according to an agreed-upon method. But when we are presented unabashedly with “alternate realities”, real news denounced as “fake news”, gaslighting, propaganda, lies presented as reality, and a political process that increasingly attempts to divorce civic morality from the naked pursuit of power, – with all that, we need to ask, how do we know what we know?

This is the question Michael Polanyi addressed in his major work, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*, and also in a series of papers and smaller works, notably *The Tacit Dimension*, *The Logic of Liberty*, and *Science, Faith and Society*, in which he explored the political implications of a misunderstanding of science. Polanyi was not a mainstream philosopher, but rather trained initially as a physician, then turned to physical chemistry (crystallography) before turning to philosophy out of a deep concern that science as the process of discovery was deeply misunderstood, and that misunderstanding had profound moral and political consequences. As a trained physician, it is therefore not surprising that he would use a medical metaphor to call attention to a moral and political problem arising from a prevalent misunderstanding of science. In his essay, “Scientific Outlook: Its Sickness and Cure,” he notes,

In the days when an idea could be silenced by showing that it was contrary to religion, theology was the greatest single source of fallacies. Today, when any human thought can be discredited by branding it as unscientific, the power exercised previously by theology has passed over to science; hence, science has become in its turn the greatest single source of error.¹

1 (*Science* 15 Mar 1957, Vol 125, Issue 3246 pp. 480-484 [DOI: 10.1126/science.125.3246.480](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.125.3246.480))

At the intersection of politics, science, and ethics, Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* occupies a unique position. He identified a pattern of thought in which false claims to knowledge could pervert morality by disguising immorality by claiming a scientific inevitability. He called this *moral inversion*. He saw moral inversion in a Marxist interpretation of history, and identified the ways the Soviet system negatively impacted the people who were forced to live under its brutality. Unfortunately moral inversion is not just a feature of times past, but is alive and well and continues to operate today.

moral inversion = the fusion of utopian perfectionism and skepticism, resulting in the quest for naked political power, masked with unrecognized moral passions, fueled by disinformation (unreality), propaganda, and outright deliberate lies, testing the gullibility of those willing to believe what they are told.

Dynamo-objective coupling = The Soviet view of Marxism professes an objective view of the social order, dialectical materialism, which is fueled by violent passions, which are not acknowledged. Any appeal to contradictory evidence, is rejected by a fierce moral passion, while at the same time, consideration of other ideals, such as freedom, are met with an insistence on the Marxist worldview.

Moral inversion operates by a dynamo-objective coupling

Any moral objection is met by an alternate reality.

Any factual objection is met by a the moral passion of a true believer

Polanyi points out that science is based on a tacit understanding of reality and that the scientist does not stand at an objective point outside the world, but rather works within a community of knowers seeking the truth. Polanyi suggests that all declarative sentences should begin with the words "I believe that . . ." to remind ourselves of our personal commitment to that which we claim to know.

Psychoanalysis also sets a high standard for knowledge, like the ancient Greeks, to know oneself, even that which is unconscious, out of focal awareness.

Perhaps never since the time of Galileo has science been called upon to account for itself in such a hostile political environment. Mainstream philosophy and many accounts of science seek an objective, authoritative (even authoritarian), even omniscient, point of view. Polanyi does just the opposite. He claims the ideal of strict objectivity is false and misleading. Personal knowledge is a kind of confessional in the tradition of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. He explains from his experience as a scientist, what it is for a scientist to pursue discovery.

The Archimedean point is often claimed to be the starting point for a rational argument, not only in philosophy but also in ethics. The great Sicilian mathematician Archimedes (ca 287-212 BCE) famously claimed that he could lift the earth off its foundation if he were given a place to stand, a solid point, and a long enough lever. Even before the Common Era (BCE), he had the sense of the earth as a spherical orb, before medieval cosmology flattened the earth to accommodate the idea of a heaven above and an underworld below. Before the earth was believed to be flat, it was understood to be round.

Descartes evoked Archimedes in his new method, what has come to be understood as the scientific method, doubting everything but the fact that he was doubting. *Cogito Ergo Sum*. I think, therefore, I am. In his second *Meditation*, Descartes refers to Archimedes' "firm and immovable point." For Descartes this was the point of certainty, that which could not be doubted:

Archimedes, that he might transport the entire globe from the place it occupied to another, demanded only a point that was firm and immovable; so, also, I shall be entitled to entertain the highest expectations, if I am fortunate enough to discover only one thing that is certain and indubitable.²

Descartes cleverly side-stepped the strictures of the medieval church by a method revealed to him in dreams. He considered himself a devout Catholic, but with a method which protected his secret self.³ For Descartes the one certain thing was that he was doubting, and since his method was revealed to him in a dream, he proclaimed this to be proof of the existence of God. Hence his [Cartesian] method [or scientific method] could not be challenged by ecclesiastical authorities.

Philosophers often evoke the Archimedean point as a way of eliminating bias from argument, rather than recognizing personal experience in-the-world and accounting for it. And students are often taught to write in the third person, passive voice, an omniscient stance, because it sounds more convincing, more authoritative. Only more recently have educators come to appreciate the validity of first person narratives.

The frustration many feel in approaching Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* is the expectation that an author, a scientist, would, like Descartes, look for an Archimedean point outside the world. Polanyi invites us inside his world as he reflects on what a scientist does in pursuing truth in a world that has come to expect a "critical outlook."

2 Manley, David B., and Charles S. Taylor, ed. [1996] 2005. "Meditations II." Descartes' 'Meditations' (HTML ed.), translated by J. Veitch (1901). Dayton, OH: Wright State University, College of Liberal Arts.

3 Allen R Dyer, "The Dreams of Descartes: Notes on the Origins of Scientific Thinking," *The Annual of Psychoanalysis* 14 (1986): 163–76.

Similarly Freud suggests that we look inward from our lived experience rather than from an outside point of view. Psychoanalysis requires that psychoanalysts not only look at their patients but also look at their own feelings and experiences. *Transferences* are the feelings the patient may develop for the analyst, but also the feelings the analysis develops toward the patient are clues to what the patient may have experienced in life and what is being repeated in the analysis.

Thomas Langford and William Poteat (*Intellect and Hope*, 1968) start their anthology introducing and assessing Polanyi's work with an essay entitled, "Upon First Sitting Down to Read *Personal Knowledge* . . ." They acknowledge in the first sentence, "*Personal Knowledge* is an exasperating book." It is exasperating because to some it goes against an accepted view of reality, the standard account, while to others it is too good to be true, something that should be obvious, but is not usually acknowledged.⁴

On first sitting down to read Polanyi, we discover that Polanyi speaks from a kind of personal authority, a reflection of a scientist trying to explain what it means to do science. Polanyi's suggestion of a post-critical philosophy calls into question the assumptions of the whole "modern age" beginning with Pascal, Descartes, Copernicus, and ending with something which is coming to be recognized as "postmodern", but different from "post-critical."

Psychiatrists often distinguish reality testing from reality processing. *Reality testing* is the ability to distinguish external objective, manifest events and mental representations stimulated by internal events, memories and fantasies. *Reality*

4 Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat, eds., "Upon First Sitting down to Read *Personal Knowledge*: An Introduction," in *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Duke University Press, 1968), 3–18.

processing is the ability to distinguish not only between a perception perceived through the senses and an idea arrived at by rational thought, but also to recognize complex realities, such as the nuances in relationships.⁵

At the age of fifty-seven, this eminent scientist decided, to the dismay of many of his colleagues who were convinced he was but a short step away from receiving a Nobel Prize, to devote himself full-time to philosophy—to the exploration of how we come to know that which we can properly claim to know. Polanyi was convinced that, apart from sheer human moral perversity, it was essentially a false epistemology that lay at the roots of the massively destructive movements and events of the twentieth century. He took up his new career with a firm sense of obligation and purpose.⁶ Isaiah Berlin probably expressed the sentiments of a good number of Michael's colleagues when he exclaimed, "Here is a great scientist giving up the Nobel to write mediocre works of philosophy!"⁷

Isiah Berlin's comment is at once appreciative, but at the same time dismissive; What he actually said was "those Hungarians are a crazy lot," as if "those Hungarians" were so similar they can be bunched together in a sweeping generalization. Berlin fails to appreciate, in the words of Amartya Sen, "the heterogeneities within a culture"⁸. And further, the kind of philosophy that held sway at Oxford, *logical positivism*, the belief that a statement could only be

5 Fred P. Robbins and Leo Sadow, "A Developmental Hypothesis of Reality Processing," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 22, no. 2 (April 1974): 344–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000306517402200209>.

6 William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski, *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 208.

7 Walter B. Mead, "Michael Polanyi (1891–1976): Introduction to an Unfinished Revolution," *The Political Science Reviewer* 37 (2008): 1–11.)

8 Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (July 1999): 3–17.

considered objectively true if it could be empirically verified, was precisely the view which Polanyi considered misguided.

Looking at the “Lessons of the Hungarian Revolution,” where people were killed for their ideas and their attempt to resist an enforced orthodoxy, one cannot but wonder about the impact of the lessons of history over time that a people learn from such events. In face of such ruthless power, is it better to acquiesce or to risk the consequences of resistance and protest? Or is it better to pretend the reality is something other than it is, and succumb to the madness?

>Figure 5.1 Michael Polanyi (1891-1976)<



In the culmination of his post-critical philosophy, *Personal Knowledge*, published in 1958, Polanyi identifies the **dynamo-objective coupling** of Soviet Marxism. The Soviet view of Marxism professes an objective view of the social order, dialectical materialism, which is fueled by violent passions, which are not

acknowledged. Any appeal to contradictory evidence, is rejected by a fierce moral passion, while at the same time, consideration of other ideals, such as freedom, are met with an insistence on the Marxist worldview. Herein lies a characteristic feature of all Marxist theory and Marxist policy: moral passions are masked as scientific laws, which, by defining a historic necessity, sanction the machinery of violence which fulfills the necessity. Each of the two components, the dynamic and the objective, takes it in turn to draw attention away from the other when it is under attack. (Personal Knowledge, 230)”

Polanyi’s identification of the moral inversion, with its dynamo-objective coupling, is evident in Marxist theory, but its dynamics go far beyond this particular political peril. Moral inversion becomes a tool for many sorts of political opportunism. *The inversion of morality is akin to the inversion of reality!* Make America Great Again would lead one to believe that there was a time in the past when America was great, but that that time no longer exists. Make America Healthy Again would lead one to believe that there was a time in the past when America was healthy, but that that time no longer exists.⁹ There is no question here of concealing greed behind moral pretenses. Quite the contrary: immoral motives are given a chance to operate by promoting them as an inevitable reality.

Personal knowledge becomes therapeutic in dealing with this cultural malaise in much the way psychoanalysis becomes therapeutic, by recovering our sense of self. Polanyi was deeply concerned with the way a false idea of “objectivity”

⁹ Nima Bassiri, “Science Will Not Save Us: RFK Jr. and the Perils of Anti-Anti-Science,” *The Baffler*, February 13, 2025, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/science-will-not-save-us-bassiri>. Bassiri points out that it is not enough to be anti-anti-science. To be anti-anti-science is to be anti-epistemology. The double negative does not create a positive affirmation. It is to become locked in the cycle of violence created by the anti-science destroyer, the would-be destroyer of science. It does not affirm reality. Here is another instance where a robust understanding of what science does is a way of countering anti-science non-sense.

undermined a moral grasp on the world. Polanyi reminds us that all knowledge is based on an antecedent tacit experience of reality, which becomes a commitment to a held belief. The statement, “Snow is white” is the equivalent of saying, “I believe that snow is white.” And anyone who thinks this is a spurious challenge to empirical, objective reality need only be reminded that the Inuit, the true connoisseurs of snow, have umpteen different words to distinguish snow.

The Lessons of the Hungarian Revolution

Michael Polanyi’s moral concern was born out of a political reality. In “The Message of the Hungarian Revolution,”¹⁰ Polanyi describes the plight of the Budapest intellectuals in his native Hungary, who revolted against the Soviet Union in 1956 on the grounds that the value of truth and justice could not be disestablished by party decree.

As Polanyi puts it, moral inversion takes place when “people pursue moral ideals within a system of thought that denies reality to moral scruples” (PK 234).

Polanyi witnessed and attempted to understand the rise of totalitarian political systems in twentieth century Europe, what he once described to me as “the destruction of European civilization,” and in an important lecture in 1962¹¹, he described this process as “the destruction of reality”. What Polanyi witnessed in his native Hungary in 1956, what we witnessed on the Capitol steps on January 6, 2021, and what we are witnessing in Ukraine is a perversion of reality, a political process uncoupled from morality.

10 Michael Polanyi, “The Message of the Hungarian Revolution,” *The American Scholar* 35, no. 4 (Autumn 1966): 661–76.

11 Phil Mullins, “The Jefferson and McEnerney Lectures,” The Polanyi Society, accessed June 23, 2025, <https://polanyisociety.org/primary-resources-mcenerney-lectures/>.

>Figure 5.2 The streets of Budapest during the Soviet invasion in 1956. <



Polanyi notes in his essay on “The Message of the Hungarian Revolution” (1966) that the Petofi circle, which repudiated Marxist-Leninist dogma, was a group of Communist party members who had become disillusioned with the doctrine that public consciousness is a superstructure of the underlying relations of production. They rejected the idea that public thought under socialism must be an instrument of the Party controlling Socialist production. They affirmed instead that truth must be recognized as an independent power in public life. The press must be free to tell the truth. Murderous trials based on faked charges must be publicly condemned. And above all, the arts corrupted by subservience to the Party must be set free to rouse the imagination and to tell the truth.¹²

Polanyi asks of the “magic of Marxism” and the “moral inversion” that derives from it,

Why should so contradictory a doctrine carry such supreme convincing power? The answer is, I believe, that it enables the modern mind, *tortured by moral self-doubt* [italics added], to indulge its moral passions in terms which also satisfy its passion for ruthless objectivity. (PK 228)

¹² Polanyi, Michael, The Message of the Hungarian Revolution. *The American Scholar*, Autumn, 1966, Vol. 35, No 4)pp 661.662.

Crisis of Democracy

Claims of absolute freedom and absolute individual rights, fueled by a feeling of narcissistic entitlement exempt from any legitimate constraint, have created a crisis of democracy, a paradox of insurrection that passionately believes itself to be restoration. This destabilizing of democracy is the predictable result of the loss of the essential distinction between public liberty and private liberty. This growing infatuation with absolute self-determination, freedom to do as I please, and simultaneously denying those freedoms to others, represents one of the most important ways in which liberal societies evolve, against themselves, putting democracy itself at risk.

This, Polanyi believes, is the morally and socially worst authority, that of the totalitarian state. Moral inversion emerges from a crushing central authority, which amasses to itself the use of lethal force. It dictates what people must do, sets rigid limits on what they may do, and goes to great lengths to control what they may say and define what they are able to think.

Building responsible freedom

The distinction between private liberty and public liberty, which Polanyi developed in his early social and economic theory, makes the paradox less puzzling because his differentiation of the two freedoms is simultaneously an analysis of authority. When tyrannical power is brought down by revolt, leaving authority dispersed among myriad individuals, the situation is, to Polanyi's mind, equally bad in a different way. While Polanyi has no doubts that tyrannies must be resisted, this potentially anarchic liberation from all actual forms of authority too often resolves

into what Polanyi calls private freedom—the simple absence of constraints, but also the absence of responsibility and shared purpose. The vacuum left by toppled authority is typically populated by private desire and pursuit of self-referencing, immediate goals. P 20-21

Tyranny (Central authority)	Public Freedom (Mutual authority)	Private Freedom (individual authority = absence of authority)
One central authority with absolute power Consolidated arbitrary power backed by physical force	The power of expertise wielded in the name of commonly shared goals and commitments	Negative freedom; self-centered All individuals are their own arbitrary authorities: “absolute self-determination”
	Responsible and disciplined freedom	Irresponsible, undisciplined nihilist illusions of freedom
	Morally rooted in the self-set standards of the tradition, guild, or community	Cut off from communal moral roots; cut off, that is, from the very moral ideals and value commitments that set limits to our private freedom

Table 5.1 Building responsible freedom¹³

¹³ Modified after Diane M. Yeager, “Rebuilding Responsible Freedom,” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 47, no. 2 (2021): 20–22, <https://doi.org/10.5840/traddisc202147217>.

Polanyi notes, *The freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must.*

(Personal Knowledge, p 309, Italics original)

Today the question becomes even more urgent in view of the emergence of political violence in the United States and abroad, and the disinformation with which they are rationalized.

In view of the seriousness and urgency of Michael Polanyi's concerns, Isaiah Berlin's dismissive comments seem a bit misguided and trivial. Why would anyone give up a Nobel [Prize] in order to write mediocre philosophy? Michael Polanyi is actually in good company to have received such cheerful approbation from Isaiah Berlin. Berlin was openly contemptuous of Hannah Arendt, but equally critical of others who did not share his outlook. According to Berlin, Arendt's doctoral supervisor Karl Jaspers, talks dim rubbish & is a facade with an interior partly hollow, partly squalid, too bogus even for Continental metaphysicians; Theodor Adorno was, like Arendt, incomprehensible and 'produced endless clouds of black smoke in place of ideas'; and David Riesman, Erich Fromm, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre as well as Arendt were 'sincere and muddleheaded'.¹⁴

Polanyi's philosophy was not immediately appreciated by the Oxford orthodoxy, largely under the sway of logical positivism, the idea that all knowledge could be reduced to empirical verification. Thus metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, theology, and psychology were meaningless because they could not be verified by empirical observation, a systematic reduction of all human knowledge to logical and

14 All these quotes from Kei Hiruta's book *Hannah Arendt & Isaiah Berlin: Freedom, Politics and Humanity*. (Princeton University Press, 2021, p 24.)

scientific foundations and a repudiation of any judgments of value. It is that account of knowledge that Polanyi called into question by demonstrating that even science relies on a personal commitment of the knower to what is claimed as knowledge. It is these very disciplines, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, theology, and psychology that have found Polanyi's post-critical epistemology most useful. Knowledge could not be divided into Two Cultures, as C. P. Snow had imagined, the world of the sciences and the world of the humanities. All knowledge involves a human element.

Michael Polanyi's brother, Karl Polanyi, was, like Michael, a staunch opponent of Soviet Marxism and defender of capitalism. Writing in the wake of the Great Depression, his major work, *The Great Transformation*, did not achieve the attention it may have deserved. Realizing the potential impact of laissez-faire capitalism, Karl Polanyi believed in the importance of a strong regulatory state to prevent excesses.¹⁵ Michael Polanyi's son, John Polanyi, did receive a Nobel Prize: in chemistry. Both Michael and Karl grew up in a deeply intellectual family. Their mother hosted politically-oriented discussion groups. Their father, who experienced ups and downs in his fortunes, was perhaps a model capitalist. He undertook to build a railroad from Budapest to Warsaw, which would have benefited the people of both countries. The project ultimately failed because of insufficient capital. It would be wrong to say that it went bankrupt, bankruptcy being a legal process to protect someone from their creditors. Polanyi senior undertook to eventually pay back all his creditors. This is a use of capital undergirded by a sense of morality, doing what is right.

¹⁵ John Cassidy devotes a chapter to Karl Polanyi in his book, *Capitalism and Its Critics: A History: From the Industrial Revolution to AI* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025). Reviewed by Jennifer Szalai, "Money Problems," *The New York Times Book Review*, June 8, 2025, 7.

Karl Polanyi's concerns based on keen observations from the 20th century, like brother Michael's, resonate again in the 21st century. There is something ominous in post-modernism, identified by Fredrick Jamison as the "cultural logic of late capitalism." Karl Polanyi noticed, and it is being noticed again, that capitalism requires a strong regulatory framework to prevent excesses. When more and more capital is being consolidated in fewer and fewer hands, and these billionaires are being given tax breaks they do not need, more and more of the burdens of a "free society" are falling to those who can least afford them. We can legitimately ask what should be expected of a modern democracy. The list should certainly include job opportunities, decent housing, basic education and healthcare, all of which now seem to be a lower priority than might reasonably and justly be expected.

So accustomed have we moderns become to the separation of knowledge from belief in what we know that it is difficult to appreciate that knowledge itself depends on faith, belief. Polanyi is particularly persuasive on this point because the data he draws on is the data of science itself and the data of political experience. Polanyi's reflections on science rely on what he calls "the tacit dimension," what we know is a *subsidiary awareness*, before it comes into *focal consciousness*. An example of this tacit awareness would be a carpenter hammering a nail. What is focal is driving the nail into the wood; what is subsidiary is awareness of the hand, holding the hammer, and the muscles that operate to force the motion of the hammer. Should the carpenter shift focal awareness to the muscles in his hand and arm, he would become awkward. Polanyi gives another example (*Faith and Reason*, p 239, quoted in *Intellect and Hope*, p 171):

A few years ago a distinguished psychiatrist demonstrated to his students a patient who was having a mild fit of some kind. Later the class discussed

the question whether this had been an epileptic or a hystero-epileptic seizure. The matter was finally decided by the psychiatrist: “Gentlemen,” he said, “you have seen a true epileptic seizure. I cannot tell you how to recognize it: you will learn this by more expensive experience.”

Polanyi observed:

The psychiatrist knew how to recognize this disease, but he was not at all certain how he did this. In other words, he recognized the disease by attending to its total appearance and did so by relying on a multitude of clues which he could not clearly specify. In other words, Polanyi’s words, he was relying on a tacit understanding of what he knew, but declined to offer a falsely incomplete explanation.

This example resonates with me as similar to an experience of my own as an attending psychiatrist. One day I was covering for a colleague who was away. I had to see all of his patients as well as my own. Ordinarily I would start a session with an open-ended question and try to follow the clues. But, pressed for time, I was more direct with one patient, who entered the room, and I asked at the outset, “Do you ever hear voices?” She nodded, and I followed up, “Are you hearing voices right now?” She nodded again. We then addressed what changes might be necessary to the treatment plan, a change of medication. After the patient left the room, a medical student (whose father was also a psychiatrist) asked, “How did you know to ask that question?” My answer was similar to Polanyi’s psychiatrist. I did not know how I knew. I was probably relying on tacit clues in the patient’s behavior that I recognized but could not specify.

Polanyi often said, “We know more than we can tell.” This was his way of emphasizing a “tacit component” to knowledge that goes beyond our ability to

specific what we know abstractly. How we recognize a face in a crowd or how we ride a bicycle or hammer a nail are examples of tacit knowing. Polanyi developed the idea of tacit knowledge in his book *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), and David Autor gave it the name “Polanyi’s Paradox”.¹⁶

The Modern, the Post-Modern and the Post-critical

Post-modernism must be more than an extension of modernism, a movement to a new time in history that may have passed without notice unless we pay attention. The objectivism of modern thought leads to a dead-end of dehumanization unless we make a deliberate effort to recover the human dimension. Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy offers a recovery of the human dimension by demonstrating that all knowing, especially scientific discovery, requires human participation.

The modern age, defined by “critical thought,” which had become so familiar, is now history. It passed unheralded, and now we must adjust to something new. Whether this is a source of lament or rejoicing depends on how we understand modernism. Our quest for cultural self-understanding forces us to come to terms with issues that Michael Polanyi insisted were of great urgency. In order to understand our present situation in historical context, we must work to shape our vision of destiny according to values and ideals which we freely and deliberately choose and openly acknowledge.¹⁷ In the words of Fredric Jameson (1991), “It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present

16 Autor, David (2014), [*Polanyi's Paradox and the Shape of Employment Growth*](#), NBER Working Paper Series, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, pp. 1–48 (Polanyi #)

17 Allen R. Dyer Polanyi and Postmodernism, *Tradition and Discovery* Volume 19, Issue 1, 1992/1993 Pages 31-38 <https://doi.org/10.5840/traddisc1992/19931915>.

historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.”¹⁸

Polanyi’s post critical philosophy offers us a coherent vision of the transition from modernism to post-modernism. For Polanyi, knowledge is not an impersonal undertaking but a very personal affirmation of that which we claim to know, Critical thought, which we equate with modernism, attempted to distance the knower from the known. Polanyi’s post-critical knowledge recovers the human dimension of knowledge by demonstrating that even in science, held to be the most precise form of knowledge by the modernists, the scientist relies on tacit unspecifiable clues in pursuit of discovery and any claim to knowledge must be accredited by the community of knowers.¹⁹

Polanyi’s focus on the misunderstandings of scientific knowledge are paralleled in the arts as well. Ruderman (1992) has described a concern in literature in distinguishing fact from fiction such that the only certainty becomes the writer’s own consciousness. The distinction between those writers who are concerned with external reality and those concerned with internal realities (the wave of the 1960s, Kurt Vonnegut, John Updike, Joseph Heller) has been identified as a distinction between modern writers and post-modern writers.

Adams (1991) has written about the distinction between modernism and post-modernism in art and theology. He sees in the work of artists such as George Segal a reintroduction of human forms and themes in art following the modern tendency toward abstract expressionism.

¹⁸ Jameson, Frederik, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

¹⁹ Dyer, Ibid.

Segal was particularly resentful of the dualistic dictum that linked abstraction to transcendence. Spirit, he was convinced, was not to be achieved at the expense of the body: both his Jewish heritage and sensual temperament dictated that universal emotion and psychic or sacred ideals could only be conveyed through “the reality of what I could sense, touch, see.”

Notable is Segal’s *The Holocaust* (at San Francisco’s Legion of Honor) in which ten figures are sprawled on the ground and one is standing behind a barbed wire fence. Not only are there human figures in the installation, but the viewer becomes part of the picture and must make choices and reflect on those choices. Does one stand behind the fence or outside the fence?

The situation of contemporary psychiatry provides yet another example of the evolution from classicism to modernism to post-modernism. Classical psychiatry involved description and interpretation. Psychoanalysis would be placed in the era of classical psychiatry with its emphasis on history, narrative, and memory. Modern psychiatry sought to explain psychopathology based on neurochemistry. The contemporary emphasis on social and economic determinants of health, and adverse childhood experiences with an integration of the bio-psycho-social and spiritual elements of mental health care may properly be understood as post-modern.

Polanyi’s view of post-modernism is an optimistic view. If we go beyond the limitations of critical thought and the damage it does to human experience, the recovery of the personal in knowing and being suggests for us the possibility of a positive future. Post-modernism (or at least the post-critical strain) can then be seen to be a recapturing of the human dimension of life and an integration of the

bifurcated legacy of modernism, a re-weaving of the treads of faith (belief) and knowledge of mind/spirit and body.

We may hope that the future is a fiduciary program based on trust and human understanding, not an attempt at control of the human and natural worlds according to some covert and unacknowledged ends. We may hope that science will be used as a human tool to achieve human ends rather than a mechanism pretending value neutrality and subverting humane goals. And especially in the realm of politics, we hope that politics will truly serve human ends and not truly political and not merely a facade hiding totalitarianism cleverly masked with a false view of reality and an inverted morality.

Interlude: The Roiling Stones

Keith Richards, the famous song writer, singer, and guitar player for the Rolling Stones is also a book lover. Who knew? One of his major interests is history and in particular the Nazi period. Why this interest? “If I weren’t interested, I’d be dead by now . . . I work in front of hundreds of thousands of people, all screaming and raving. Dictators have the same effect. I’m interested in how people can fall for dictators, and in the origins of the mass psychosis they provoke. That’s what I do for a living, after all. Time to go to the office—go out in front of hordes of howling people! I’m fascinated by the transformation of a person going on stage. You become part of the mass hysteria. You forget yourself in the moment. Is that what Hitler experienced?”²⁰ Is this what Trump experiences at his rallies?

Recollections of Hitler and the Nazi era may seem remote, but as Keith Richards notes, the excitement that can be generated in a crowd is something that happens all the time.

20 Estelle Ellis, Caroline Scebohm, and Christopher Simon Sykes, *At Home with Books*, Carol Southern Books New York, 1995.

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