



MICHAEL POLANYI

unknown and untapped

**HIS LEGACY HOLDS HOPE
FOR RETURNING THE
WESTERN TRADITION TO
WONDER, TO ADVENTURE,
TO ANTICIPATION**

BY ESTHER L. MEEK

“Michael Polanyi,” historian and humanities professor Wilfred McClay once told me, “is the greatest underrated public intellectual of the 20th century.”

A Hungarian scientist-turned-philosopher, a creative, polymathic genius, Polanyi (1891-1976) developed his proposals in hopes of protecting Western science and thought from itself, in response to the totalitarian horrors that ravaged his beloved Europe. The corpus of his work offers a fresh approach to knowledge and society, abounding with insightful motifs. In the words of historian of philosophy Marjorie Grene in 1977, Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing is “grounds for a revolution in philosophy.”

But Polanyi remains relatively unknown and untapped, as Western civilization continues to live out the self-destructive consequences

that its modernist premises entail. How can this be? I suggest a few possible reasons. First is the way Polanyi himself approached his own scholarly pursuits.¹ Raised in an interdisciplinary, intellectually rich home and school environment, Polanyi never hesitated to cross disciplinary boundaries. As an inadvertent result, the one field in which he received professional training is the one in which he never practiced, and the ones in which he practiced are ones in which he never received professional training. So in all his formal contributions, Polanyi was working as a brilliant amateur. He believed that this actually gave him an advantage: as an outsider he was able to

1 William Tausig Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); in reviewing to write this essay I have utilized Mark Mitchell’s *Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing* (Library of Modern Thinkers; Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), ch. 1.

bring criticisms more incisive, and proposals more creative, than those of which guild members were capable. But this unorthodox practice, of course, neither engaged the main currents of discussion in their official language, nor endeared him to the professionals—or even put him on their radar.

Second, evidently bearing out this unusual conviction, Polanyi generated creative proposals in multiple fields which proved to be decades beyond what the guild could even entertain at the time. Take, for example, his potential theory of adsorption, in chemistry. Einstein and other renowned scientists rejected it as an outrageous disregard of current scientific opinion. Ten years later, however, Polanyi's position was confirmed and entered scientific orthodoxy. In economics, I am told, he proposed an innovative blend of Keynesianism and Friedmanism which is only now being considered. And in philosophy of science and epistemology,



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his “subsidiary-focal integration” has yet to be widely acknowledged or independently achieved. Decades before postmodernism challenged the hegemony of the modernist Enlightenment project, Polanyi had devised a positive third alternative which features a healthy affirmation of by-now widely regarded features of knowing, such as the embedded, body-rooted, traditioned, social dimensions of knowing, rooted in a distinctive epistemic proposal that continues to outdistance the insights of others. Half a century later, Polanyi's epistemic insights remain both deeply insightful and largely untapped.

Third—and this suggested reason is positive, beautiful, and especially germane in style and substance to Polanyi's “Christian legacy”—his own gracious professional demeanour and his epistemology both welcomed disciples into a “conviviality” that confers freedom to flourish in personal creative contributions.² Polanyian thought seems to be the seed that dies and produces fruit. It's as if he says, no longer do I call you disciples; I have called you friends.

There have been many who responded to his work, many whose names are more widely known than Polanyi's.³ But some of these, unleashed thereby to their own pursuits, have produced work that has inadvertently truncated Polanyi's rich vision, or has underrepresented the author's debt to it.⁴ Happily, we may all be blessed to read the man himself. A Polanyi Society colleague of mine recently likened the read to the luxury of a hot tub: Polanyi's profound insights are brilliantly articulated and remain innovative and provocative if only for the reasons I cite here.⁵

2 I know this from the testimony of my colleagues in the Polanyi Society who knew him personally, as well as from our shared experience working with his thought.

3 John V. Apczynski, “The Relevance of *Personal Knowledge*: Reflections on the Practices of Some Contemporary Philosophers” (Paper for the Polanyi Society's “*Personal Knowledge at Fifty*” Conference, Loyola University, June 2008), 1-13. Apczynski suggests the influence of Polanyi's thought on Alasdair McIntyre, John Searle, and Charles Taylor.

4 Polanyi's influence on T. S. Kuhn is both explicit and problematic. Polanyi himself felt conflicted both regarding the inaccuracy of representation and the inconsistent acknowledgement of debt. See the entire volume XXXIII no. 2 (2006-7) issue of *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*.

5 Polanyi's magnum opus, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) was his Gifford Lectures of 1951 and 52, prepared for publication by Marjorie Grene. This is the most expanded and rich development of his thought. A host of later lectures and essays are stand-alone pieces

POLANYI FOUND THE WEST'S "LIBERTY" AS IDEOLOGICAL AS
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The impetus for Polanyi's leaving science to save science came from his concern over the enthusiasm being shown for socialized science, even in Britain where he had fled from Hitler, in the period between the wars. In seeking to defend the liberty for exploration and for a "society of explorers" that Polanyi the brilliant scientist felt must pertain for the survival of science, he of course looked to his own Western tradition of ideas for justification. Such liberty for exploration in the science he practiced required the freedom to responsibly hold beliefs which could be doubted, and which could prove mistaken.

But Polanyi found no such account in Western philosophy. Instead, he found the unwavering belief (!) that knowledge is explicit, certain, propositions with no remainder, and the presumed practice of detached "objectivity" in pursuit of it. He found generally unnoticed, much less resolved, the ancient dilemma of how, in view of this, a person could ever discover or learn anything new—for either you know it or you don't; either case prevents moving toward new knowledge.

Polanyi found philosophers of science fixated on reducing scientific explanation to logical inference, and reducing discovery to "the scientific method." He found them reducing mental activity to behaviourism or materialism. And he found them forgoing a

commitment to reality for the positivist claim that scientific knowledge is merely convenient summaries of data. Everywhere he found the explicit rejection of the very things which scientific discovery required to be tacitly held.⁶

He found epistemologists ringing changes on knowledge as "justified, true belief," when what science needed was the justification of doubtable beliefs. Apart from this, it would appear that the West's "liberty" was as ideological as the Stalinist rejection of free science as bourgeois. And the ideal of certainty gained via explicit rules was "self-contradictory, systematically misleading and culturally destructive."

Polanyi felt it worth sacrificing a brilliant scientific career to save the science he loved by propounding an alternative epistemology. A fresh epistemology must be one which acknowledges and ensconces as foundational the very dimensions epistemology is senseless to deny, the factors that tacitly catalyze knowledge even if they are denied. Knowledge is only to be had working from dynamic authoritative traditions which novices appropriate by indwelling the masters to whom they apprentice themselves. Explicit knowledge is only to be had as it is rooted in a far wider expanse of tacit awareness, utilizing tacit powers of intuition, imagination, and confirmation in our search for reality, to which we responsibly and sometimes riskily choose to submit.

Polanyian epistemology proposes a "fiduciary program" in which knowledge stands on

that serve as a quick entrée and as a good preface to *Personal Knowledge*. (The 2-page Preface of *Personal Knowledge* itself is a wonderful synopsis.) Grene recommended "Tacit Knowing," the first lecture in *The Tacit Dimension* (see the next note for bibliography). Additionally, she collected the essays she felt especially worked out his thought in *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

⁶ Peter Godfrey-Smith offers an accessible story of 20th century philosophy of science in *Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). It contains no mention of Polanyi.

the shoulders of responsible personal commitment, a move that explicitly references Augustinian faith preceding understanding. Knowledge grows only in the fertile soil of traditioned community and apprenticeship to masters. It involves “conviviality,” or indwelling, empathetic involvement with both the community and the yet to be known—a Johannine intimacy. Insight is akin to conversion. It brings a sense of having contacted reality, confirmed indeterminately through a sense of a wide range of future prospects. It involves submission to the real, to truth, to responsible personal profession with universal intent. Polanyi’s agenda, as he says in *Personal Knowledge*, is “to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false.”

Polanyi catalogued the vast array of tacit powers and coefficients which are required to support human knowing. He developed his epistemology concretely in his “subsidiary-focal integration.” All knowledge involves the active shaping or integration of clues we indwell to apprehend a coherent pattern; we “subsidiarily” rely on, indwell, clues to focus on that pattern. Knowing, no matter how explicit, always involves both subsidiary and focal levels of awareness. The subsidiaries include things we rely on without ever having specified; and also, in our subsidiary reliance on them, all the clues are logically unspecified. He showed that the focal pattern can only be apprehended as we indwell the clues. The clues are clues only as we indwell them, too. He argued that the integrative feat has phenomenal, semantic, and ontological aspects: integration transforms the appearance of the clues and of the world, it renders both meaningful, and it bespeaks contact with independent reality.

Polanyi showed how subsidiary-focal integration deals in as subsidiary everything from

our lived bodies and surroundings to our tools, from hammers and bikes to cultural narratives and theoretical frameworks. But it nevertheless honours the primacy of the real. Subsidiaries skillfully indwelt bind us ever more concretely in the world, anchoring us through our tacit commitments to orient beyond ourselves toward vistas of yet-to-be-knowns fraught with prospects. The grounding of the articulate in the inarticulate is the heart of the matter, says Grene, because “the understanding of understanding, of rationality itself, demands an understanding of the way in which the subsidiary supports the focal.”⁷ This, she says, “should be the conceptual instrument for a one hundred and eighty degree reversal in the approach of philosophers to the problems of epistemology.” Polanyi’s innovative philosophy compares favourably to every other major contemporary philosophical tradition: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, analytic philosophy, naturalism, pragmatism, and postmodern ventures.

Yet Polanyi struggled to be heard, pitted as he was against the very false ideal of objectivism, the deeply ensconced fact-value, reason-faith, divorces, which he laboured to defeat. Many of those in its thrall—effectively, Westerners—only heard irrationalist, subjectivist ravings—much as has been the case with postmodern critiques. This is a fourth reason his thought remains comparatively unknown. It is also the reason it still very much needs to be heard and appropriated.

His stunning epistemic reorientation returns science and religion to the same footing. They are no longer at odds. In *Polanyi: Art*, Mark Mitchell writes that it clears the way to reintroduce knowing God to true knowing. Despite Polanyi’s absence of formal training

7 Grene, “Tacit Knowing: Grounds,” 168. Grene states that Polanyi is widely known for his claims about tacit knowledge and faith frameworks. But that is to miss his central insight regarding subsidiary-focal integration.

in Christian religion, Christian theologians who knew of his work did not miss its import.⁸ “Reliance on clues” to “dispose or orient ourselves” toward a reality which transformatively reshapes us, testifying to implications we cannot yet name, is an account fraught with concrete particularity that nevertheless honours mystery; and it is an account of rationality that insightfully expresses what Christian believers have in mind by committed faith.

Some Christian thinkers have deeply engaged Polanyian epistemology: Lesslie Newbigin, Colin Gunton, Parker Palmer, Trevor Hart, to name a few.⁹ And a collection of essays which

directly explore the Polanyi-theology interface will soon be released.¹⁰ In my own epistemic proposals, which I call covenant epistemology, Polanyian epistemology grounds a vision of knowing as paradigmatically an interpersonal, covenant-fraught relationship. Not only is the covenant motif a Christian theological one, but I argue that this approach reinstates the redemptive encounter, in which a person is transformatively known by Christ, as paradigm for all human knowing.¹¹

8 The works of Thomas Torrance, J. H. Oldham, William Poteat, and Charles McCoy all reflect their engagement with Polanyi's thought.

9 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), and *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), and *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San

Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1966); Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

10 Murray Rae, ed., *Critical Conversations: Michael Polanyi and Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, forthcoming, 2011). Contributors include: R. T. Allen, Tony Clark, Peter Forster, Bruce Hamill, Lincoln Harvey, David Kettle, Alan Torrance, and Paul Weston. See also Phillip A. Rolnick, Person, *Grace and God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007). See also David Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context: Towards the Conversion of the West—Theological Bearings for Mission and Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

11 Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, forthcoming, 2011). While many of its motifs are abroad in our time, this book endeavours to justify and connect

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*HIS STUNNING EPISTEMIC REORIENTATION RETURNED
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For all the much-recognized consonance of Polanyian epistemology with Christian touchstones, much of evangelical Christianity, in its general absence of philosophical awareness ensconced in the still-wide current of modernism, remains sorely in need of Polanyian ministrations to free the practice of biblical Christianity from the ravages of a defective epistemology (as Mark Noll has demonstrated in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*). It is still widely and tacitly presumed that the goal of the Christian life is comprehensive, certain, Christian information—that’s what doctrine, theology, sermons, and apologetics are about. The rest of the Christian life isn’t about knowledge; it concerns faith and application. Where the unexamined and for that reason powerfully operative epistemological assumption is that knowledge is articulated information, this shapes the way we do church and discipleship and mission.¹² It shapes the way we body forth our entire Christian life; I believe that it thwarts the gospel.

In a very real sense, Polanyi’s legacy has yet to be fully bequeathed. How to spread the word about Polanyi is something that I and a small band of Polanyi Society colleagues ponder and even scheme about all the time.¹³ The prospect holds hope for all in the Western tradition, not just for Christians. It is not just Christianity that stands to benefit. Science and art, education, politics, and economics do as well. But perhaps the most delightful outcome of Polanyi’s legacy will be, for those yet to discover it, the revised apprehension we may have of our mundane, concrete involvements in the world, returning us to wonder, a sense of adventure, and the delighted anticipation of the gracious inbreaking of God.

them by offering a viable argument for an interpersoned epistemology. See also Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2003).

12 Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009). A wonderful book helpfully assessing the current situation in Christendom, and rightly engaging epistemology as part of its proposed third way, it indicates no awareness of Polanyi’s work and of its superior value for the project. As a Polanyi scholar, my standard practice in reading books is first to check the index for references to Polanyi. It is rare to find a book which has such an entry.

13 Consider attending the Polanyi Society’s next conference at Loyola University, Chicago, June 8-10, 2012.



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