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## **POLANYI'S "INVITATION TO DOGMATISM"? A RESPONSE TO ANDY SANDERS' "POLANYIAN PUZZLE"**

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As he states with admirable clarity, Andy Sanders has attempted to reconcile the apparent discrepancy between three important components of Polanyi's fiduciary programme, namely (1) his invitation to dogmatism, (2) his fallibilism and (3) his thesis that "truth lies in the achievement of a contact with reality". Sanders takes up each of these components as autonomous theses – "as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle" – which he has come across in the text of a great philosopher whom Sanders admires and respects and he wonders how such apparently discrepant theses can be coherently affirmed not merely by Polanyi but also as true in general. He eventually arrives at an interpretation of each that makes coherent sense and that is fully credible, Sanders believes, within the context of contemporary analytic epistemology. Given that is his aim, I would say that he succeeds quite well. My worry is that Polanyi would find the resultant interpretations, abstracted from the context of his own argument, not quite recognizable as his own ideas. Furthermore, I fear that the resultant interpretations Sanders offers leave behind or minimally appropriated certain essential aspects of Polanyi's fiduciary programme.

Sanders unhesitatingly embraces Polanyi's fallibilism; that, I believe, is the starting point from which Sanders constructs his reconciliation. Polanyi's fallibilism is the least troubling component of Polanyi's fiduciary programme for Sanders, even though he begins his analysis with the "invitation to dogmatism." This predisposition for identification first with fallibilism, reflects the widespread antipathy among contemporary analytical epistemologists for anything hinting of epistemological foundationalism, let alone dogmatism. Whatever is behind Sanders' predisposing identification with fallibilism, it appears to be the source of his discomfiture with Polanyi's apparent "invitation to dogmatism," as well as his discomfort with straightforward talk about truth as "contact with reality." It would appear - and I stress the word "appear" – that at a certain level, though clearly not in all respects, Sanders shares with his philosophical peers the commonplace, *foundational* conviction of the modern critical ethos: namely, that significant philosophical insight comes from reliance upon the attitude of doubt or critical suspicion of subjectivity.<sup>[1]</sup> This prompts me to wonder if Sanders understands what it is about the critical intellectual ethos that Polanyi deliberately seeks to counter in terms of a *post-critical, fiduciary* philosophical programme. On the other hand, perhaps Sanders does realize what it is but has serious reservations about Polanyi's proposed alternative to it.

Please don't get me wrong. Polanyi clearly is a fallibilist and fallibilism is a crucial

component of his fiduciary programme – as Sanders acknowledges. But fallibilism is *not* the point from which to begin to understand what Polanyi is getting at when he *appears* to offer an "invitation to dogmatism" - especially not without first appreciating Polanyi's "logic of affirmation," namely, his argument that *acritical* belief (distinguished clearly from *uncritical* belief) is the *conditio sine qua non* of all of our knowledge of reality. Actually, the *only* place where the phrase "invitation to dogmatism" appears is the following passage, which occurs in the next to last paragraph of the section entitled "The Fiduciary Programme," which itself comes at the end of chapter 8: "The Logic of Affirmation." Polanyi writes,

This invitation to dogmatism may appear shocking; yet it is but the corollary to the greatly increased critical powers of man. These have endowed our mind with a capacity for self-transcendence of which we can never again divest ourselves. (PK 268)

As I read this passage within its full context, it becomes clear that the phrase, "invitation to dogmatism," is a rhetorical trope and is *not to be taken literally*. What Polanyi means is an acknowledgment that the intellectual shift to a *post-critical* paradigm that he is calling for will necessarily *appear* as a shocking invitation to dogmatism" to those who still operate within the *critical* paradigm. (It may help to recall that the crucible of pyrrhonic skepticism within which the *critical* paradigm was forged branded as "dogmatism" any posture of belief that ventured to believe beyond what is immediately obvious. So any appeal to belief of the sort Polanyi makes would immediately be derided by the skeptic as dogmatism.)

Polanyi does indeed invite a posture of methodological belief, even what the skeptically inclined would consider a methodology of "overbelief." Once fully understood with proper qualifications, I believe that Sander's conception of "methodological dogmatism" comes close to what Polanyi is inviting. But I do not believe that Polanyi would be happy with calling it that. Dogmatism commonly connotes a closed mindedness, an ideological attachment and commitment to certain explicit propositions, certain representations of reality, as the truth. It is neither open to nor ready to acknowledge respects in which the explicit propositions to which it is committed fall short of fully capturing the reality it purports to represent. Methodological believing, as Polanyi construes it, while it is relatively closed to radically contrary considerations, is conceived first of all as a means of openness or access to certain realities not otherwise, for the present at least, accessible. The commitment is fundamentally *to* what the methodological believing renders progressively accessible, *not to the beliefs as such*, so far as they may be rendered explicit. The beliefs in question are instrumental to that access and are revisable accordingly. Thus in methodological believing, as Polanyi conceives it, beliefs are not held dogmatically – which would be to focus attention on the explicit beliefs themselves. Rather, the focus is upon the realities to which the acritical believing, represented (always with some inadequacy) by those explicit beliefs, fallibly grants access.

It follows that an "invitation to dogmatism" as such is not itself a component, let alone a crucial component, of Polanyi's fiduciary program - especially considered in abstraction from appreciation for Polanyi's distinction between *acritical* beliefs and *uncritical* beliefs. The last thing that Polanyi is inviting is an invitation to an *uncritical* dogmatism. The core of his fiduciary programme, referred to ironically as an "invitation to dogmatism," is not simply a "[restoration] to us once more [of] the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs" (268), though it would appear to be on first reading by someone who has yet to appreciate the difference between *acritical* and *uncritical* beliefs. Nor is the core of his fiduciary programme simply a justification for deliberate holding of unproven beliefs "until we have had opportunity to test their strength and fruitfulness" or "until a more reasonable alternative to them is found" - although this is closer. Rather is the core of that programme, the "[recognition of *acritical*] belief . . . as the source of *all* knowledge" (266, emphasis mine), coupled with

[the realization] that we can voice [these *acritical* beliefs, which is to say,] our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions - from within the whole system of acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own [whether critical or uncritical], prior to the holding of any particular piece of [explicit, representative] knowledge (267).

What Sanders goes on to articulate as *methodological dogmatism*, drawing on Imre Lakatos' work is fully consistent with Polanyi's fiduciary programme and it is insightfully reflective of a number of its aspects. Nevertheless, I believe it falls short of capturing fully that to which Polanyi was ironically referring in speaking of his "invitation to dogmatism." Sanders' defines "methodological dogmatism" as the thesis "that in the course of inquiry we may hold on to our beliefs and theories as long as this is reasonable and no better alternative is available." He links it with a correlative principle of tenacity, which he defines as the thesis that we should not give up our theories or stories in the face of adverse evidence too soon because doing so would deprive us of the opportunity to find out their strength, fruitfulness and significance. The two of these theses constitute what Sanders calls "traditionalism." If these two are taken to represent Polanyi's position as a whole, they would likely be viewed by Polanyi, I suspect, as something of a prevarication. The recognition of them as "not only quite rational, but even necessary for progress" by epistemologists and philosophers of science during the second half of this century would certainly be affirmed by Polanyi. And I suspect Mikael Stenmark's distinction between "full acceptance" and "dogmatic acceptance" would also be welcomed by Polanyi. All of these things resonate substantially with aspects of Polanyi's fiduciary programme. But they fail to represent it fully. The problem, as I see it, is that acceptance of them alone would fall short of accomplishing the paradigm shift that Polanyi is calling for in *Personal Knowledge*. However, it may be that minimizing that paradigm shift, or avoiding having to embrace it altogether, is Sanders' intent.

What about the theme of "contact with reality"? This too is a concept in Polanyi that can neither be understood by itself in abstraction from the core of Polanyi's fiduciary programme which I have indicated above, nor can it be understood in abstraction from Polanyi's understanding of fallibility. On the whole, Esther Meek's portrayal of Polanyi's conception of truth in the sense of contact with reality, as explicated by Sanders, is sound and clear. As far as I am able to tell, Meek carefully interprets Polanyi's language about contact with reality fully within the context of Polanyi's thought as a whole. The comments Sanders offers in addition are interesting, and on the whole are helpful and agreeable.

However, I do not find the controversy concerning "what to make of contact with reality in the humanities, in metaphysics, in religion and in other large-scale world-views" to be as problematic as Sanders appears to find it. That controversy leads Sanders to conclude that Polanyi's "notion of truth in the contact sense still needs substantial elaboration before it can be applied outside the natural sciences." In numerous places in his writings, Polanyi speaks of our capacity to encounter and recognize responsible human choice and human greatness *as real* - which are surely transcendent to direct empirical observation, though to be sure they are mediated through empirical observation. Even theoretical structures and entities in physics would seem to be transcendent in this sense as well, for that matter. The "reality" of transcendent or transcendental principles such as truth, justice, and beauty is clearly more problematic, but not insuperably so, I would contend, and certainly not for Polanyi. Polanyi himself applied it outside the natural sciences, although not all Polanyi interpreters agree with how these passages are to be interpreted. In any case, nothing Sanders says in *the present essay* directly supports Sanders' suggestion that perhaps Polanyi's idea of truth as contact with reality only fully applies in the realm of the natural sciences - unless it be his assertion (itself problematic, I believe) that Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing is "a new and *thoroughly naturalized* epistemology" (my emphasis). To be sure, Polanyi "places the quest for understanding in an evolutionary, biological, psychological and socio-cultural perspective." But Polanyi's anti-reductionist critique of each of these disciplines results in a worldview and an epistemology open to transcendence in a way that modern metaphysical naturalism characteristically does not. Consequently, I do not find his epistemology obviously a "thoroughly naturalized" one, especially not as that phrase is commonly used in contemporary analytic epistemology.

I am glad to find Sanders suggesting that "a 'traditionalist' and an 'existentialist' interpretation of the fiduciary program need not necessarily exclude each other" and "that they might [even] be complementary." I believe they are compatible and would hope we might come to agree together that they are complementary in substantial respects, though I am not happy with categorizing my interpretation as "existentialist" - at least not without some serious qualifications. Because Polanyi himself deliberately avoided connotations associated with the label "existentialist," labeling my interpretation as existentialist may suggest that I may be importing something alien to Polanyi's own sensibility. There is much that has passed as "existential" or "existentialist" in philosophy that neither I nor

Polanyi wish to be identified with. On the contrary, my concern is simply to explicate and understand what it is that Polanyi's own reflections on belief, truth, commitment, and reality bring to light – not to force them to fit some "existentialist" bias. I believe that that is Sanders' intent as well. Stereotyping does little service other than reinforce prejudice, in philosophy and elsewhere.

My rendering of the contact with reality sense of truth found in Polanyi using terms outside the idiom of modern Western analytic epistemological – namely, *as an enacted first-person relationship of achieved rapport with, and fidelity to, reality* – is a deliberate attempt to articulate the radical implications of Polanyi's break with the assumptions of modern epistemology and philosophy of mind. Modern theories of truth, comprehensively and elegantly summarized and analyzed by R. L. Kirkham's *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction*, which Sanders cites, take two implicit assumptions for granted: (a) the sole sense of truth that is of philosophical interest is a normative property of explicit propositions[2]– i.e., a property of representations of reality, whether verbal or mental – determined through objective critical assessment, and (b) the relationship or dis-relationship of a mind (a knowing subject or a person) to reality is a function of the truth of the propositions it believes. (Strictly speaking, this latter assumption is not made by non-realists, at least not in this form.) Mental life, the life of the knowing subject, thus subject to critical scrutiny, is assumed in principle to be *representational* of any objective reality it purports to know; its relationship to reality is indirect. It has no contact with reality (at least none but itself as a Cartesian *cogito*). It is at best directly acquainted with its immediate contents, with its representations of reality, not reality itself. To the contrary, Polanyi places the knower in the world in direct exploratory acquaintance with reality. Tacit knowing is an extension of our embodied selves into the world, indwelling the known. In that sense, we are directly, though fallibly, acquainted with reality, and it is in terms of that acquaintance that we develop our explicit propositional representations of the world and assess them critically. Consequently, for Polanyi the truth status of propositions is derivative from (with proper qualification one could say, a function of) the person interpretively integrating these propositions to their bearing on the reality they purport to represent – or, more precisely, derivative from the truthfulness of the relationship of that person to the reality in question, from her or his achieved *rapport with* that reality – not the other way around. This is not to say that we should leave off being concerned philosophically with the truth of propositions or reduce the latter to "enacted relationships," not in the least. Rather we need to expand our philosophical understanding of truth to encompass a fundamental matter irreducible to the truth of propositions – indeed, a matter more fundamental than the truth of propositions – namely the truth of a first-person acquaintance relationship to reality.

To answer fully each of Sanders' objections to my rendering of the contact sense of truth would take more space than can be justified in this brief article. I will, however, say a few words in response. Sanders identifies five difficulties: (1) My appeal to a distinction between 'belief in' and 'belief that' to illuminate some aspects of the distinction between

tacit awareness and explicit knowledge is taken by Sanders to oversimplify the intertwining of the two pairs. My response: I fully grant that these two types of belief are often deeply intertwined, but that doesn't eliminate the difference between them. (2) My "overly emphasizing first-person knowledge by acquaintance . . . runs the risk of collapsing personal truth into subjective truth." My response: I don't see how my rendering constitutes an "over emphasis," unless one supposes, wrongly, that I wish to reduce propositional truth to first-person acquaintance truth. I agree, the latter is only a part of the picture, but it is a crucially important part that the usual picture completely leaves out of account. Sanders does not say enough for me to make sense of what the collapse of personal truth into subjective truth would involve or see how what I am saying might imply that. (3) More generally, he accuses me of "denying or covering up the possibility of making the tacit (partly) explicit" which for him seems "an unwarranted over-emphasizing of kinds of tacit knowledge that are inarticulate in principle." My response: I do not deny nor have I ever denied that the tacit cannot partly be made explicit. (4) My rendering seems, on his view, to make truth as contact with reality so tacit ("wholly and exclusively a matter of tacit knowing") that knowledge of it becomes needlessly mysterious – e.g., about how we are able to become aware of contact in the first place. My response: Tacit knowing is a form of consciousness; it is not unconsciousness. Acquaintance knowledge is an awareness of contact with what one is acquainted with – though that awareness is fallible, partial, and subject to misjudgment. It is not, however, reflective consciousness in the way that explicit representations enable critical reflection. We can in various, incomplete, often fumbling respects articulate what we are tacitly aware of. It is not wholly ineffable, and I have never contended that it was. (5) My rendering leaves unclear how the possibility of error can have its proper place and how uncritical dogmatism can be rejected. My response: The former of these two points will be addressed below. Uncritical dogmatism presupposes an explicit set of propositional beliefs to which one is uncritically and closed mindedly committed. The interpretation of Polanyi for which I am arguing has nothing to do with uncritical dogmatism, as should be clear from my previous discussion of it.

The foundation for these objections seems to be Sanders' stated conviction in an earlier version of his essay that, as he states it, "The tacit, in order to be made known, must humanly be (re)presentable" - i.e., be made "explicit, . . . linguistic or propositional." In the current essay, he puts the point much more mildly by stating that "tacit knowing can only be made explicit if it is in some way and in some degree (re)presentational." For the life of me, I am unable to find anywhere in Polanyi's writings the idea that to constitute knowledge the tacit must be representational – except for the obvious fact that his entire epistemology is *an explicit attempt* to call our attention to the nature and ubiquitous presence of tacit knowledge. In **The Study of Man**, part one, Polanyi explains how we can only be *critical* of what we make explicit, but that of which we do not or cannot make explicit we cannot be critical. Sanders' conviction would seem to imply that we can be said to know only that about which we can be critical. But that would rule out all tacit knowing as *knowing* on Polanyi's account – except in so far as it is represented explicitly.

Polanyi's point is that our tacit knowing, rooted in *acritical* belief, never becomes *critical* in this respect (or never wholly does) precisely because it is *itself* neither representational nor wholly and directly representable. Our *tacit* knowing, as Polanyi stresses again and again, is something not essentially different in kind from the knowing of animals other than human, all the way down to the lowly planaria, who lack our linguistic and correlative critical powers. We revise and improve our tacit knowing by fits and starts, by a process of trial and error, not by direct critical analysis. That is to say, our tacit knowing is quite different from what we can subject to critical scrutiny by way of representation in language or other means. In motion studies, training exercises, and the like, as Sanders reminds us, we do indeed work indirectly at improving our tacit skills through the dialectic of analysis and reintegration. In that respect tacit knowing for us stands in an ongoing dialectical relation with explicit knowing. But that doesn't make it representational, nor does it reduce acquaintance knowledge to representational knowledge.

Sanders' problems with my rendering of truth as contact with reality appear, from where I am sitting, to reflect three things. First, they reflect a lack of full appreciation of Polanyi's understanding of how *acritical*, tacit knowing is distinct from critical, explicit knowing. (I grant that the two are far more intertwined for us than the simple distinction on its face may suggest.) Second, they appear to reflect an insufficient appreciation of Polanyi's reconception of the knower as embodied and situated *in-the-world in relation* to the known, the knower's indwelling of the known as a reality standing over against the knower and in some measure transcending its grasp – i.e., Polanyi's bringing to light the embodied being of the knower - for here is where the paradigm of knowing shifts from knowledge by accurate representation to knowledge by direct personal acquaintance. (It shifts, but in a way that the former is retained, not eclipsed.) Third and last, Sanders' misgivings with my rendering of truth as contact with reality reflect, I believe, a difficulty in grasping the distinction both I and, I believe, Polanyi wish to make between a first-person, present tense relationship and a third-person relationship to reality.

On my view, the relationship of contact with reality that truth is, is always *first-person present tense*; it is not and can never be a third person relationship observable by a *detached and uninvolved* third party. (See *PK* pp. 303 ff.) Any third-person recognition of someone else knowing (or failing to know) something, of someone standing in a relationship of truth (or falsity) with that reality, inevitably and necessarily involves implicating oneself in a first-person, present tense relationship of presuming to make contact with the reality in question – i.e., in presuming to determine and know it. (As well it implicates oneself in a first-person, present tense relationship of apprehending and understanding the third person's cognitive attitude toward that reality.) This is part of what Polanyi is getting at when he stresses that we cannot make reference to truth or knowledge non-committally - which the *critical* paradigm assumes. This point is something easily lost sight of once it is glimpsed, especially to persons operating with the *critical* paradigm, and it is not exactly easy to grasp it in the first place for persons who customarily think in

accordance with that paradigm. Nevertheless it is crucial, especially to the *post-critical* paradigm of knowing.

Finally, I wish to make something unambiguously clear. It is my position that each and every claim to truth that we make, every claim to an enacted relationship of rapport with, and fidelity to, reality, all our participation in truth, is **fallible**. It is inconceivable to me that this would not be so. That is what **faith** as *fides* and *fiducia* and *fidelitas* means: there is no truth without the risk of error. The chief problem with fidesm or fideistic dogmatism is that it presumes to do away with risk, with vulnerability to error, apart from which it is not faith! (A similar presumption is made by what Sanders calls foundational dogmatism.) All knowing is a venture, a quest, a risk-filled achievement. That is part of what Polanyi means in claiming that all knowing is rooted and grounded in acritical belief-in or faith. Being an *achieved* relationship, *by definition* every presumed truth can fail of achievement - in all sorts of ways and to all sorts of degrees. Intimations of truth are inevitably mixed with error, which we must strive our best to distill and purify. Thus I agree entirely and wholeheartedly with Sanders' explication and endorsement of Meek's account of how contact with reality can be fallible.

Part of Sanders' misgiving derives, I believe, simply from the philosophical tradition's (especially the modern analytic philosophical tradition's) neglect of tacit knowing and knowledge by acquaintance in all of its varieties and dimensions. Because of that neglect, there is much that we do not understand about it yet, and much that we do not have conceptual resources developed to do justice to. Just because it is fundamentally tacit and non-representational does not make it "totally mysterious" or "ineffable." In other words, we still have much to explore and discover concerning the nature, the fallibility, the limits, and the justification of knowledge by acquaintance. Polanyi has by no means said the last word. Nor have I.

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## References

1. This is evident in Sanders' essay when he explains that ". . . [W]e should always be willing to revise our beliefs in the light of new evidence and experience. Thus fallibilism . . . takes the adoption of the critical stance as a virtue. Its point is the simple idea that, as C. S. Peirce put it, 'the first step towards *finding out* is to acknowledge you do not satisfactorily know already . . .'." In an earlier version of this paper, he called it "the *rationale* underlying methodological dogmatism."
  2. Minimalist theories of truth seek to avoid use of the nominal category of "truth" altogether, by defining "*p* is true" as materially equivalent to the state of affairs asserted by *p*.
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