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THE “POST-CRITICAL” SYMBOL AND THE “POST-CRITICAL” ELEMENTS OF POLANYI’S THOUGHT

Abstract

This paper discusses the “post critical” nature of Polanyi’s thought by looking at several components: (1) the history of Polanyi’s use of the term “post-critical”; (2) Polanyi’s active account of comprehension and its evolution; (3) the major elements of Polanyi’s criticism of modern thought and Polanyi’s constructive alternative vision.

1.0 Introduction

Everyone notices that the subtitle of Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*¹ is “Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy.” However there is surprisingly little direct discussion of the term “post-critical” in *Personal Knowledge* or in any other writings by Polanyi. This paper discusses Polanyi’s term and what he seems to mean by it. I begin with a bit of history about the term.

1.1 “Post-Critical” In The Gifford Lectures

The term “post-critical” dates back at least to the period in which Polanyi was preparing his 1951 (First Series) Gifford Lectures. The subject for the lectures identified on the cover page of the syllabus is “Commitment: In Quest of a Post-Critical Philosophy.”² Also Lecture 6 in the First Series (21st May, 1951) has the same title as that later used in the subtitle of *Personal Knowledge*, “Towards a

¹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, Towards A Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbook Edition, 1958). All citations of *Personal Knowledge* (as well as citations of other Polanyi works, after the first citation) are by title abbreviation (*PK*) in parenthesis following the quotations or section references. Citation to *PK* are to the Torchbook Edition which includes prefatory material in the earlier University of Chicago and Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd. hardback publications.

² The syllabus is in The Papers of Michael Polanyi, Box 33, Folder 1. This and succeeding quotations from and references to the Polanyi Papers are used with permission of the University of Chicago Library’s Department of Special Collections. Citation of any archival material will hereafter be shortened to the particular document, box number and folder number noted in parentheses (e.g., 33-1). All of the quotations in the remainder of this section of this paper are from the syllabus in 33-1; they will not be noted in the text.

Post-Critical Philosophy.” The precis of this lecture gives a clear comment that identifies the domain into which “post-critical philosophy” fits:

Philosophy cannot perform its task within the restrictions of objectivism. These were breached in the first place in Lecture 4 by recasting for the purpose of accuracy all declaratory sentences in a fiduciary mode which links them to a speaker or writer. I shall now venture a step further towards a post-critical philosophy.

That further step is concerned with what Polanyi a little later identifies as the “rehabilitation of overt belief”: “I propose to break altogether with objectivism by making it my purpose to find and declare what I truly believe in.” Polanyi acknowledges that “a frankly fiduciary philosophy” has certain dangers, but also it “should enable us to envisage without self contradiction the social rootedness and social responsibility of our beliefs concerning men and society.” He notes that fiduciarism must guard against depriving itself of any claim to objective validity; it must learn to express belief in a way which will countenance beliefs as beliefs without reducing their content or the act of affirming them to the status of mere subjectivity.

In sum, Polanyi’s comments in the 1951 syllabus for his First Series Gifford Lectures make clear that “post-critical” is a term that is aligned with what he calls “fiduciary philosophy” or “fiduciarism” and aligned against what Polanyi dubs “objectivism.”³ “Fiduciary philosophy” is concerned with finding and declaring what one truly believes and Polanyi holds the project of rehabilitating overt belief is a worthy philosophical enterprise.

1.2 Personal Knowledge: The “Fiduciary Program”

Polanyi makes a number of the same points in the prefatory material of *Personal Knowledge* that he does in the 1951 syllabus, although he does not use the term “post-critical.” He sometimes comes close to the same language used in his 1951 syllabus, but he also seems to be reaching for new terms. In the August 1957

³ Polanyi uses “objectivism” rather broadly to point to philosophy of science and epistemological views that fail to respect the personal participation of the knower. Polanyi had a relatively clear sense of general sense of what “post-critical” philosophy opposed. “Objectivism” often seems to be used interchangeably with “positivism,” a term that Marjorie Grene points out covers much more than the thought of Carnap. Grene suggests that Polanyi often seems to have characterized many other contemporary philosophers—some of whom may have had ideas akin to his own—as “positivists.” See *A Philosophical Testament* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1995), 63 (hereafter cited in parenthesis as *PT*).

“Preface” (the original preface) to *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi comments on the personal participation of the knower in the known and on his view that “personal knowledge” is not merely subjective but is an act of comprehension described as a “responsible act claiming universal *validity*” (*PK*, xiv). In the June 1964 “Preface to the Torchbook Edition” of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi identifies the objective of *Personal Knowledge* as “the task of justifying the holding of unproven traditional beliefs” (*PK*, ix). He points out that “more than forty declarations of belief” in the book are listed in the “Index” under “fiduciary program.” Marjorie Grene reports that when she and her children were preparing this “Index,” that Polanyi “had specially requested that I stress all passages that showed the book to be a *credo*.”⁴ She contends that this reflects how “Polanyi himself set great store by the fiduciary programme” (“*TKG*”, 167).

Grene describes the nature of the “fiduciary programme” by pointing out that Polanyi’s constructive argument in *Personal Knowledge* is based on an analogical foundation. She suggests that Polanyi’s method in his *magnum opus* “consisted essentially in broadening and stabilizing the interpretive circle through a series of analogies, by showing that human activities of many kinds are structures in the same hopeful yet hazardous fashion as those of science” (“*TKG*”, 167). That is, Polanyi links his account of commitment in science to a broader range of human committed endeavor: “. . . the account of commitment, expanded to a fiduciary programme, showed us science as one instance of the way in which responsible beings do their best to make sense of what is given them and yet what they, by their active powers, have also partly already enacted” (“*TKG*”, 167).

1.3 Comprehension as Active and the Evolution of the “Fiduciary Program”

As the quotation above about “personal knowledge” from the 1957 “Preface” implies, one of the primary ways Polanyi generically describes “post-critical philosophy” and the “fiduciary programme,” is to say that he sets forth an active account of comprehension based upon the revision of Gestalt ideas. He acknowledges this adaptation in the original “Preface” of *Personal Knowledge* and in almost every major publication after *Personal Knowledge*⁵:

⁴ Marjorie Grene, “Tacit Knowing: Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 8, no. 3, October 1977: 167 (hereafter abbreviated as “*TKG*” in parenthesis by page number).

⁵ See for example, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 28-28 (hereafter *SM* in parenthesis), *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1966), 6 (hereafter *TD* in parenthesis), and Polanyi’s 1963 introduction, “Background and Prospect” (11-12) to the Chicago reprint of *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964—hereafter *SFS* in parenthesis) for some additional comments on the transformation of Gestalt ideas.

I have used the findings of Gestalt psychology as my first clues to this conceptual reform. Scientists have run away from the philosophic implications of gestalt; I want to countenance them uncompromisingly. I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill. Skillful knowing and doing is performed by subordinating a set of particulars, as clues or tools, to the shaping of a skillful achievement, whether practical or theoretical (*PK*, xiii).

Polanyi's "post-critical philosophy" is an account that affirms knowing as a personal, skillful activity, a performance, in which particulars are indwelt and integrated around a focus. This active participation or shaping by a person is not an imperfection in human knowing but is the very condition of knowing⁶.

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi's "conceptual reform," that is, his account of the active nature of comprehension, is an account that emphasizes commitment. Grene links the "fiduciary program" of *Personal Knowledge* especially with the emphasis upon overt commitment in this book ("*TKG*", 167-168). Certainly, in *Personal Knowledge* the holding of unproven traditional beliefs in science and other human endeavors is justified by Polanyi's discussion of the ways in which commitment is central to all knowing. It is in *Personal Knowledge* that there is a lengthy discussion of universal intent⁷. But eight years after the original publication of *Personal Knowledge*, in the 1964 "Preface to the Torchbook Edition" of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi himself recognized that his "fiduciary program" had become less reliant upon overt commitment as he worked out the structure of tacit knowing:

But there is a parallel line of argument in the book which goes deeper and has shown greater potentialities for further development. In surveying the places

⁶ Active shaping implies a centered subject and the creation and implementation of standards of value; Polanyi's account of comprehension in the "fiduciary program" thus might be viewed as leading to certain inferences about the person and agency: Comprehension is an unformalizable process striving towards an unspecifiable achievement, and is accordingly attributed to the agency of a centre seeking satisfaction in the light of its own standards. For it cannot be defined without accrediting the intellectual satisfaction of the comprehending centre. (*PK*, 398). Polanyi uses the same reasoning in his account of morphogenesis as involving active shaping and achievement. See *PK*, 398.

⁷ The "Index" of *Personal Knowledge* reflects that "universal intent" is another key idea. There are a host of citations throughout the book. It is worth noting that the final paragraph of the "Skills" chapter, which is the conclusion of Part One of *Personal Knowledge*, is a paragraph that binds together commitment and universal intent. It is also the case that there is a whole chapter on commitment (containing many comments on "universal intent") and that this is the concluding component of Part Three, which focuses upon "The Justification of Personal Knowledge."

where human knowledge rests on a belief, I have hit upon the fact that this fiduciary element is intrinsic to the tacit component of knowledge” (*PK*, 10).

What Polanyi is pointing to here⁸ is that he came better to understand what he calls the “fiduciary element” in knowledge as he continued to explore the importance of the inarticulate after *Personal Knowledge*. A bit later in his 1964 preface, Polanyi comments on the ways his writing after *Personal Knowledge*, and especially his forthcoming book, *The Tacit Dimension*, recasts his early emphasis upon commitment: “My later writings, including a new book on press, are less occupied with the justification of our ultimate commitments and concentrate instead on working out precisely the operations of tacit knowing” (*PK*, xi).⁹

In sum, several of the things Polanyi himself said, as well as Marjorie Grene’s account of Polanyi’s development, point to the way that “post-critical philosophy” understood as the “fiduciary program,” evolves. Polanyi seems to have gotten into philosophy, as he puts it in *The Tacit Dimension*, as an “afterthought” (*TD*, 3). The politics of the early twentieth century led him to seek a clear understanding of the organization of science and its relation to the larger political sphere. As Grene puts it, “the problem of the administration of science”(“TKG”, 165) led Polanyi toward articulation of “an epistemology of science: . . . a philosophical interpretation of the claims of scientists to know about nature, claims which are in principle susceptible of error, yet also, in circumstances that need to be elaborated, worthy of acceptance” (“TKG”, 166). This epistemology of science is developed expansively in *Personal Knowledge*. At least by the time of the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi was comfortable describing the “fiduciary program” in terms of his development of an active account of comprehension. He acknowledged this active account adapted Gestalt ideas and emphasized overt commitment. But this commitment-centered account of “the fiduciary program” already had seeds in it that grew, in the sixties, into a richer account in Polanyi’s later theory of tacit knowing. As he explores and articulates in greater depth the structure of tacit knowing, Polanyi comes to hold that “this structure shows that all thought contains components of which we are subsidiarily aware in the focal content of our thinking, and that all thought dwells in its subsidiaries, as if they were parts of our body” (*TD*, x).

⁸ Grene also notes this development (“TKG”, 168).

⁹ See also Polanyi’s comment in the “Introduction” (April, 1966) to *The Tacit Dimension* where he points out that his “reliance on the necessity of commitment has been reduced by working out the structure of tacit knowing” (*TD*, x).

2.1 “Post-Critical” As A Symbol Representing Polanyi’s Critique of Modern Philosophy And His Alternative Constructive Vision

On November 30, 1958, just after the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi gave a lecture in Austin, Texas, titled “The Outlook of Science: Its Sickness and Cure.” He makes, in this little known lecture, one of his very few direct comments on the subtitle of *Personal Knowledge*:¹⁰

I have given to the book called *Personal Knowledge*, on which this lecture is based, the subtitle “Towards a Post-critical Philosophy.” This was meant to say that in my view the great intellectual revolution which is marked by the names of Descartes, Hume, Kant, J. S. Mill, and Bertrand Russell, is nearing its final limits. This movement was guided by the principle that doubt is the solvent of error which leaves behind truth (33-11).

This comment suggests that the term “post-critical” served as a vehicle or symbol that gathered up both the major themes in Polanyi’s criticisms of modern thought and the major constructive philosophical alternatives in Polanyi’s vision. I believe this is the case. The previous discussions have outlined some elements of Polanyi’s alternative constructive vision; I will return to the constructive elements of Polanyi’s alternative vision at the end of this paper. Before this final turn, it is worth surveying the major critical themes and their reworking that the “post-critical” rubric seems to fold together.

There is no single approach that works perfectly to summarize Polanyi’s criticisms of modern thought and his effort to recast its contours. Andy Sanders put together, several years ago, in a *Tradition and Discovery* article, a very illuminating brief comparison of modern and postmodern elements in Polanyi’s thought¹¹. Jerry Gill, more recently, has tried to link Polanyi with “constructive” postmodernism¹². Below, I briefly outline a set of five Polanyian themes articulating criticisms and

¹⁰ Richard Charles Prust’s dissertation quotes this unpublished lecture (The Knowledge and Reality of God: The Theological Implications of Michael Polanyi’s Epistemology and Ontology, Duke University, 1970. pp.5-6) and I am indebted to him for calling my attention to it. Polanyi did publish an article with the same title in March of 1957 (“Scientific Outlook: Its Sickness and Its Cure” in *Science* CXXXV, Mar. 1957, pp. 480-504), but this article is not much akin to the lecture and does not contain the quotation. There is a copy of the lecture in archival material for 1958 identified as a “short manuscript” in Box 33, Folder 11.

¹¹ Andy Sanders, “Tacit Knowing—Between Modernism and Postmodernism,” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 18:2 (1991-1992): 15-21.

¹² Jerry H. Gill, *The Tacit Mode, Michael Polanyi’s Postmodern Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

counters to important modernist ideas. These constitute in a substantial fashion the “post-critical” perspective¹³.

2.11 The Critique of Doubt

The 1958 lecture quoted above directly mentions Polanyi’s critique of doubt. There is an entire chapter on this topic in *Personal Knowledge*. Polanyi holds that doubt is not heuristic and modernity’s celebration of doubt as the path to truth has lent undeserved respect to skepticism and disguised the importance of tradition in communities of inquiry. Polanyi argues that doubt really is parasitical upon belief. It is belief that is the primary matter for human beings and the problem of justifying belief is a serious concern in Polanyi’s thought. Polanyi’s account of belief is one that is thoroughly fallibilistic. Belief may be and in fact often is wrong. How do we know? The cooperating interpretative community makes contact with reality and continues the work of exploring reality; we acquire more penetrating visions of reality in time and our errors become clear to us.¹⁴

2.12 The Critique of the Ideal of Impersonal Knowledge

Hand in hand with Polanyi’s critique of doubt is his critique of the ideal of a wholly impersonal knowledge. There are no negotiable unsigned checks, according

¹³ Although I cannot treat this topic here, there is no question that there are affinities between Polanyi’s “post-critical” perspective and perspectives of other philosophers. Sanders and Gill somewhat treat this as have others. The archival correspondence with Grene suggests she was often encouraging Polanyi to see connections between his own ideas and those of other thinkers who seemed generally to be interested in a “post-critical” transformation of philosophy. Polanyi seems often to have resisted Grene’s comparisons as Grene particularly notes in the case of Merleau-Ponty (“TKG”, 164 footnote). Nevertheless, Polanyi does often make generous references to similarities between his ideas and those of others in prefatory materials for some publications. See the 1964 “Preface to the Torchbook Edition” of *Personal Knowledge* (*PK*, x) and the 1963 new introduction, “Background and Prospect,” to the University of Chicago reprint of *Science, Faith and Society* (*SFS*, 12-13).

¹⁴ Polanyi’s realism is tightly bound up with his fallibilism, his ideas about truth and his claims for personal knowledge. What is involved in the post-critical turn in philosophy Marjorie Grene puts starkly in her recent book *A Philosophical Testament* (9-27) when she says it is time to recognize that knowledge is justified belief. The Platonic separation of knowledge and belief is transformed in post-critical thought. Polanyi sets forth knowledge as a subset of belief, namely that belief that is justified. The rub comes in specifying what is involved in justification. First, one can say that justification involves “universal intent” but, second, Polanyi injects into his account a great respect for the interpretative community and its dynamic tradition embodied in the practices of living members engaged in ongoing investigation.

to Polanyi, and there is no such thing as wholly impersonal knowledge. Polanyi makes the person central. He shifts the discussion of “knowledge” to include the skillful agent engaged in an activity of knowing. In the 1961 essay “Knowing and Being,” Polanyi forthrightly claims that “knowledge is an activity which would be better described as a process of knowing” (*KB*, 132). In an earlier section, I have outlined Polanyi’s account of comprehension as active, showing how participation is the condition of knowledge rather than a fault. There are chapters in *Personal Knowledge* on skills and intellectual passions that make Polanyi’s strong case for personal knowledge by articulating the nature of participation. As I have noted above, personal knowledge does not imply that knowledge is merely subjective. Polanyi redefines objectivity and sets forth a strong case that personal knowledge can be justified.

2.13 The Critique of Reductionism

Polanyi’s “post-critical” perspective includes criticisms of reductionistic thinking, a pattern of thought sometimes aligned with objectivism. Reductionism, of course, is older than modernity, but reductionist views have been popular in modernity in many venues. Polanyi criticizes, for example, deterministic materialist views such as those of Laplace, historicist reductionism, behaviorist perspectives, and reductionistic readings of natural selection. Polanyi argues for a spectrum of inquiry running from physics to dramatic history. He understands inquiry in terms of a hierarchy of increasing complexity of subjects of investigation. Particularly in Part Four of *Personal Knowledge* and in his later writing, Polanyi attacks reductionism in biology. His “principle of marginal control” (*TD*, 40, sometime termed the “principle of marginality”) is an ontological implication or amplification of his epistemological claims for tacit knowing. The two level structure of comprehensive entities, Polanyi contends, has the logical implication that a higher level of organization can “come into existence only through a process not manifest in the lower level, a process which thus qualifies as an emergence.” (*TD*, 45).

2.14 The Critique of Centralized Control

As I have suggested above, Polanyi’s work in philosophy developed because he was searching for an account of science that would allow it to prosper in the twentieth century. Many of both the critical and constructive philosophical ideas that Polanyi later articulated grew out of his effort to make sense of and respond to political events and the emerging social and political philosophy after World War I. Polanyi was, of course, from the thirties forward an outspoken opponent of planned science, whether in Stalinist Russia or Great Britain. He was equally critical of

centrally planned economies and published many things on this topic before *Personal Knowledge*. The critical component of Polanyi's social and political philosophy I summarize by identifying it as a critique of centralized control.

Jacobs has shown that, as early as 1941, Polanyi's writings reflect that he was analyzing and comparing planned and "dynamic" orders or, as he later termed them, "corporate" and "spontaneous" orders.¹⁵ Possibly developing his views from hints in Kohler, Polanyi works out basic ideas about social organization that focus around two schemes, centralized direction and voluntary adjustment by units with an incentive to cooperate. Polanyi applies this typology, arguing that the administration of science, the operation of a complex economic system, the operation of common law legal processes, and several types of cultural endeavor (e.g., literature) function best as dynamic orders. That is, designed order imposes an undesirable rigidity (in certain human endeavors) that impedes growth or change, whereas mutual adjustment by individual units promotes growth through orderly change as an evolving process¹⁶.

Polanyi opposed (and sharply criticized) the practical emphasis of movements to make scientific research socially useful (and to do away with the pure and applied research distinction) as well as philosophical ideas about science that eliminate emphasis upon truth and truth seeking. Such criticisms are linked to his ideas about the importance and nature of dynamic or spontaneous orders. Polanyi emphasizes the importance of tradition in spontaneous orders. He argues science, for example, has or is a dynamic tradition; those learning to be scientists are apprentices who appropriate the current manifestations of tradition and, eventually, when they are no longer novices, reform tradition based upon their own contact with reality. Although early modern science needed to resist the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church,

¹⁵ Struan Jacobs ("Michael Polanyi and Spontaneous Order, 1941-1951", *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 24:2 (1997-98): 14-28) argues that Polanyi's discussions on this topic have generally been overlooked (especially by Hayek scholars). He contends that 1941-1951 is the period in which Polanyi works out his views and thoroughly discusses this topic. As I suspect Jacobs knows, there are even earlier discussions (such as that in Polanyi's 1940 essay "Collectivist Planning"[in *The Contempt of Freedom* (New York: Arno Press reprint, 1975: 27-60)] in which planning and "supervisory authority" (33ff) are discussed in terms similar to later discussions in the decade he focuses upon. Jacobs is cited hereafter in parentheses by page number. See also C.P. Goodman's interesting recent essay "A Free Society: The Polyanian Defense" (*Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 27:2 (2000-2001): 8-25), which on several points parallels Jacobs' discussion. Jacobs and Goodman offer outstanding scholarly discussions (using Polanyi's early writing) of what I am here, in a summary fashion, dubbing Polanyi's critique of centralized control.

¹⁶ I am drawing upon Jacobs' discussion (14-19), which succinctly summarizes Polanyi's account of these different orders and their application.

Polanyi contended scientists in the late modern world need to overcome this animosity toward tradition, since the authority of science is essentially traditional and science is a tradition-shaped and tradition-grounded activity.¹⁷

Polanyi's offered sharp criticisms of modern notions of freedom or liberty and these ideas too are bound up with his ideas about dynamic or spontaneous orders. Jacobs suggests that, by 1941, Polanyi is already making a distinction between "private" and "public" liberty. Spontaneous orders require public liberty, which is the opportunity individuals must have to respond in ways "they personally judge to be appropriate to a given ideal end" (Jacobs, 19). This type of liberty is integral to the process of adjustment of a dynamic order and is distinguished from private liberties that are more directly linked with satisfying individual desires.¹⁸ Jacobs points out that public liberties are, for Polanyi, critical in liberal society, but are denied in totalitarian states. Private liberties seem originally to have grown out of public liberties and can be quite limited or quite extensive in both democratic and totalitarian societies, in Polanyi's view (Jacobs, 19-21).

Polanyi criticizes modern society for its emphasis upon individual or private liberties and its failure to recognize that public liberties are the foundation of progress in endeavors such as science. The right to speak the truth as a scientific researcher sees it, based upon her contact with reality, is the foundation upon which the growth of scientific knowledge rests. Science can be governed by scientific opinion only because there are civil liberties that assure intelligent discourse. More generally, Polanyi holds that the ideal of self-improvement in modern society is grounded in the right of opposition in the name of truth.¹⁹ Modernity, however, has

¹⁷ The most succinct late treatment of these themes concerned with tradition (although they certainly appear elsewhere) is Polanyi's 1962 essay "The Republic of Science: Its Political and Economic Theory" originally published in the inaugural issue of *Minerva*, edited by Polanyi's friend Edward Shils. The article is included in *Knowing and Being, Essays by Michael Polanyi* (ed. Marjorie Grene, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969]: 49-72—citations below are to page numbers in this publication of the essay) and is on the Polanyi Society web site (<http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/mp-repsc.htm>).

¹⁸ Interestingly, in the "Preface" to his 1951 book *The Logic of Liberty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1951 - hereafter cited as *LL* in parenthesis), which contains essays from the forties, Polanyi says the following:

There is a link between my insistence on acknowledging the fiduciary foundations of science and thought in general, and my rejection of the individualistic formula of liberty. This formula could be upheld only in the innocence of eighteenth-century rationalism, with its ingenuous self-evidences and unshakable scientific truths (*LL*, viii).

¹⁹ "The Republic of Science," 70.

lost its confidence in transcendent ideals such as truth.²⁰ At best, modernity explains away such ideals. Modern ideals supporting unlimited improvement of society, ideals that came to be accepted after the French Revolution, Polanyi argues, have been undercut and transformed by the impossible ideal of a fully impersonal knowledge, by the adulation of doubt, by disrespect for tradition, and by utopian impatience. Polanyi regards the modern mind as prone to nihilism and violence since it brings together excessive moral passion and pervasive skepticism.

2.15 The Critique of Metaphysical Dualism

Polanyi's "post-critical" perspective offers an at least implicit critical response to some of the basic metaphysical suppositions of modernity. Polanyi's thought is often classified as philosophy of science and epistemology. But for several reasons, Polanyi's work does not comfortably fit under these rubrics. It is important to emphasize that the way in which Polanyi accounts for knowledge undermines some of the metaphysical distinctions basic to modern thought. Polanyi does not presuppose as a foundational assumption that reality falls into two kinds, thinking subjects and non-thinking matter. Marjorie Grene emphatically rejects this dichotomy and where it leads philosophically in a way that is quite consistent with Polanyi:

There is no fundamental contrast between me-in-here and everything-else-out-there. And that is not because 'I' am everything or nothing and 'it' (or 'they') nothing or everything, but because the radical split between in-here and out-there makes nonsense of a world that is living, complicated, messy as you like, but real. I am myself an instantiation of that world's character, one expression of it, able also in an infinitesimal way, to shape and alter it (*PT*, 114).

²⁰ Polanyi's view is succinctly articulated in a 1947 essay "Foundations of Academic Freedom" which was included in *The Logic of Liberty*:

The general foundations of coherence and freedom in society may be regarded as secure to the extent to which men uphold their belief in the reality of truth, justice, charity and tolerance, and accept dedication to the service of these realities; while society may be expected to disintegrate and fall into servitude when men deny, explain away, or simply disregard these realities and transcendent obligations (*LL*, 47).

Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing as a from-to conception of knowing cannot be reconciled with a metaphysically dualistic approach to reality.²¹ To parse all of reality into things material and mental (or to choose between these options) is to slip into a philosophical venue that ultimately undervalues the embodied way in which humans and other animals make their way in the environment. Again as Grene puts the Polanyian point, "it is precisely the alternative between materialism and mind-body dualism which we are trying to overcome, and which the nature of the phenomena demands that we overcome."²² Grene suggests that what post-critical philosophy calls for metaphysically is "an analytical pluralism" which she describes aptly:

... a metaphysic which will allow us to acknowledge the existence of a rich variety of realities, not all of which need exist in identifiable, spatio-temporal separateness. Minds are not separate from bodies, yet persons capable of 'minding' are richer and more highly endowed than persons, or individuals, not so capable. And achievements of responsible persons, such as laws, works of art, or forms of worship, may again be richer in reality than those persons themselves. That does not mean that such performances, such products of human skill, somehow exist 'in themselves', separately from the existence of those who contrive, support, and also depend upon them. The alternative 'separate mind' or 'no mind', two reals or one real only, has been too long dominant over western thought. We need to recognize once more the richness of thought in comprehending what cannot be wholly reduced to so explicit a pair of formulae. And equally, we need to recognize the richness of reality, including the achievements of human persons and human traditions. For this transcends even the profoundest acts of comprehension harbouring for future knowers consequences not yet imagined: ... (*KK*, 242-243).

As creatures who dwell in that which we would know, our human being is being-in-the-world. Polanyi's notion of bodiliness is primarily a functional distinction and this means that what is bodily (i.e., what functions as the physical body or extends the physical body) changes. Humans (and other animals, according

²¹ Grene points out that a from-to conception of knowledge prevents "a return to the notion of a 'separate' consciousness thinking thing." ("TKG," 170). However she thinks Polanyi's aggressive refutation of the denial of consciousness by behaviorists led him to fail to realize or to forget "the subtlety of his own anti-reductivist position . . ." ("TKG," 170) and thus Polanyi, in some late essays, defends the mind-body split in order to affirm the importance of mind.

²² Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 242. This work is cited hereafter in parenthesis as *KK*.

to Polanyi) are creatures with tacit powers; we can extend ourselves by dwelling in that which is of interest. To change what we dwell in is to change our being, however incrementally. This Polanyian perspective is one that simply denies the validity of what Grene calls (above) the “separate mind” or “no mind” bifurcation.

As my extensive references to Grene’s discussion of this metaphysical criticism and reconstruction of modern thought suggests, I believe Polanyi was not always clearly aware of some of the metaphysical implications of his own views. Thankfully, Polanyi had a long and fruitful friendship with such an insightful, sympathetic philosopher as Marjorie Grene; she sometimes is better able to interpret the philosophical implications of Polanyi’s perspective than Polanyi is. The metaphysical implications of Polanyi’s mature theory of tacit knowing were perhaps hidden from him, as Grene has suggested, because of momentary concerns such as confronting reductionistic behaviorism (“TKG”, 169-171). Polanyi’s interest, in the last decade of his life, shifted more and more to concern with problems of meaning. He did not carefully explore metaphysical issues of post-critical philosophy as he sought to apply the theory of tacit knowing to art, myth and religion. This late work does seem to have been a part of Polanyi’s lifelong interest in restoring confidence in overt belief, although some scholars have questioned whether it is a genuine expansion of the post-critical perspective articulated in *Personal Knowledge* and the decade afterward.²³

2.2 Conclusion

Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy is a perspective that, as he announced in his Gifford Lectures, restores confidence in overt belief. This in no way, however, means that post-critical thought is antirational. In fact, Polanyi affirmed the human capacity for a profound rationality that is grounded not in objectivism or a skepticism reliant upon doubt. The post-critical vision of rationality accepts the person’s role as an active shaper of thought. Human beings are capable of responsibly serving self-set standards. Such standards both define and transcend the individual, understood as a member of a community of inquiry with a dynamic tradition. Polanyi’s post-critical perspective is a view that weaves inseparably together epistemology, *Lebensphilosophie* and an account of the evolving universe.

²³ See the essays by Ronald Hall (“Michael Polanyi on Art and Religion: Some Critical Reflections on *Meaning*,” *Zygon* 17:1 (March 1982): 9-18) and Bruce Haddox (“Questioning Polanyi’s *Meaning*: A Response to Ronald Hall,” *Zygon* 17:1 (March 1982) in the 1982 issue of *Zygon* devoted to “Science and Religion in the Thought of Michael Polanyi.” Certainly, also Grene’s correspondence with Polanyi suggests that she is dubious about some of his efforts to stretch the theory of tacit knowing to account for art, myth and religion. See, for example, her comments in letters of August 26 and October 8, 1968 (16-3).

Polanyi regards human beings as creatures capable of accepting a calling to develop our skills in order to explore the unknown. For post-critical philosophy, thought is a special human vocation that fits into the universe as a fascinating, beautiful and changing domain.