

# THE POLITICS OF IMPERFECTION

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## ABSTRACT

Michael Polanyi is one of the most important philosophers of the middle years of the Twentieth Century. He notes that all methods, even the most formalised, rely upon our judgements. It is not possible to absent ourselves, and nor should we try. If all knowing involves the participation of a knower, then it follows that all knowing is a form of valuation. We make judgements about what we ought to believe. Our beliefs may be mistaken, but they are not arbitrary. They are guided by our tacit awareness. In his analysis of the structure of tacit knowing – his key contribution to philosophy – Polanyi seeks to reconcile fact and value (which in the modern period have been broken apart) while at the same time justifying the need for free societies.

“When someone is honestly 55% right, that’s very good and there’s no use wrangling. And if someone is 60% right, it’s wonderful, it’s great luck, and let them thank God. But what’s to be said about 75% right? Wise people say it is suspicious. Well, and what about 100% right? Whoever says he is 100% right is a fanatic, a thug, and the worst kind of rascal”

*(Quoted by Czeslaw Milosz (1953) in the frontispiece of *The Captive Mind*.)*

1.

Few would disagree that the key turning point in the philosophy of Michael Polanyi is his discovery – while writing *Personal Knowledge* (Polanyi 1958) – of the structure of tacit knowing. His earlier philosophical writings are, with hindsight, working their way towards that discovery, and his subsequent writings are an elaboration upon it. Despite the brilliance of his insights into what he later described as the perceptual, functional, semantic, and ontological dimensions of tacit knowing, you might conclude that Polanyi has only had a marginal impact upon contemporary philosophy, but you would be quite wrong. Polanyi anticipated or directly influenced many of the innovations that have most excited philosophers in the second half of the Twentieth Century. Within political thought the rejection of the assumption that a modern society can and ought to be centrally directed is associated with Libertarians such as Hayek and Oakeshott, but their focus, respectively, upon the (efficient and therefore desirable) role that spontaneous order plays within polycentric (including economic) systems, and the claim that most knowledge (due to its tacit character) is inaccessible to a central planner, draws directly upon the work of Michael Polanyi. He also influenced Communitarian opponents of Libertarianism

such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre. Both (rejecting what they perceive as the atomistic individualism of Classical Liberalism) seek to remind us that human beings are meaning seeking animals reliant upon the (largely tacit) interpretative context supplied by membership of a community.

2.

In epistemology the rejection of the claim that science is (or ought to be) a method determined practice in which disputes are settled by appeals to explicit rules has been replaced by a 'new philosophy of science' associated with names such as Kuhn and Feyerabend, in which scientists rely upon (tacit) assumptions that sometimes generate incommensurable ways of interpreting the world, has also been directly influenced by the work of Michael Polanyi.

The claim, by Hubert Dreyfus and John Searle amongst others, that the quest to supply a formal account of what it is to be a meaning – an approach which motivated “Good Old Fashioned AI” – neglects the context from which meanings arise was also directly influenced by Polanyi. It has led to a situated cognition approach (which Lakoff and Johnson call ‘Second Generation Cognitive Science’) which solves the frame problem by accepting that all rule following relies upon a tacit background. Last, but not least, there has been a shift in the sciences away from atomistic reductionism towards approaches that emphasise the importance of emergent complex systems. Although this way of understanding the universe is the product of many different thinkers, his ideas about hierarchies of boundary conditions (in his reflections upon the ontological dimension of tacit knowing) have led some to identify Polanyi as a key contributor. You might conclude therefore that far from being on the margins Polanyi has been a very influential figure, whose insights have been popularised by his admirers. But once again you would be quite wrong. All the figures I mention are keen to distance themselves from Polanyi, and for a very good reason; his work rejects precisely those aspects of their work that have helped their popularity. Hayek is a subjectivist. Oakshott is a relativist. When Taylor and MacIntyre advocate community they do so as apologists for central direction (by the Welfare State and the Catholic Church respectively) and as critics of those (such as Polanyi) who seek to justify the individual and institutional liberties that generate a Civil Society. Kuhn became fashionable because he implied that science is a series of shifts between equally valid ways of describing the world – the relativistic implications of which were enthusiastically promoted by Feyerabend. Dreyfus asks us to view experience as interpretation all the way down. It is Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (a Nazi and a Stalinist respectively) rather than Polanyi who Dreyfus is keen for us to admire. Most writings about emergence (notwithstanding their hostility to the claim that particle physics can supply us with a ‘theory of everything’) rely upon physicalist assumptions i.e. they deny that mind is an emergent reality capable of exerting a (downward) causal agency because this would violate the closure of physics.

3.

In order to understand what is going on here we need to appreciate that the theory of tacit knowing effects a shift in the way in which we understand the world, one that undermines some of the assumptions that have generated the modern world. Such a shift is disturbing and disorientating, and so it is hardly surprising that (for all his influence) Polanyi is both resisted and misunderstood. At this point it is helpful if we remind ourselves of the suggestion by the English philosopher Robin Collingwood that if we are seeking to understand a claim we ought to pay attention to the question to which it is the answer. In the case of Polanyi the question to which his analysis of the structure of tacit knowing is the answer is his conviction that Western Civilisation is in a state of crisis. Although Taylor and MacIntyre are as keen as Polanyi to identify the failures (as well as for Taylor the achievements) of modernity, they are better at tracing its intellectual history than they are at supplying us with solutions. So what is modernity? Polanyi links it with science and liberalism; or to express it less sympathetically – positivism and nihilism. They are closely linked. Modern science supplies a vision of the universe in which values have no place, and the moral passions that are thereby rendered homeless vent themselves (via a moral inversion) by attacking the notion that values are grounded in anything more than subjective preferences. Polanyi traces this state of affairs back to the conflict between the two fundamental constituents of Western thought – Greek rationalism and Jewish moral fervour. Both are utopian. In the former philosophers claim that they have arrived at an understanding of the order of the cosmos, and in the latter prophets inform us (on divine authority) that (individual and cosmic) changes are going to take place leading to the creation of a more just world. Each tradition eventually exhausted itself. Greek philosophy ended up either as scepticism, or the conviction that wisdom is passive acceptance of the (benign or otherwise) order of the universe. The (nationalistic but theologically grounded) Jewish fervour for radical change eventually led the Romans to completely destroy their State, leading to their dispersal across the Roman Empire.

4.

In the Roman period however (and when we talk about Western civilisation we are talking about the heirs of Rome) a synthesis of Greek philosophy and Jewish morality took place. This synthesis of fact and value laid the foundations of the Christian civilisation of the Middle Ages. This is not the place to elaborate upon that synthesis except to speculate why the Greek and Jewish elements became so influential. I suggest that their pioneering use of the alphabet is relevant, because it transformed oral traditions into literate cultures founded upon (and renewed by reflection upon) texts. What interests us (and Polanyi) is the tension between the Greek and Jewish elements, which for all their similarities (Palestine and Greece after all are quite close to each other geographically) eventually pulled the medieval synthesis apart, creating the modern world in which we all (China, India, and the

Middle East included) now live. The medieval synthesis broke down because the Greek element rejected the demand that scientists should submit to theologians, and the Jewish element refused to derive value from nature – because all value derives from God. Without Christianity (as Stanley Jaki persuasively argues) there would have been no modern science, but the assumption that value lies outside the world prepared the way for nihilism.

So what is Polanyi's solution? He does not believe that a return to the Middle Ages is possible (or desirable) he seeks instead (via his theory of tacit knowing) to supply a new synthesis of fact and value. He undermines utopian aspirations by upholding the importance of persons i.e. conscious agents making fallible judgements. At the same time he denies that values are grounded in nothing more than commitments. Truth, for example, is not anything we want it to be; once we have formulated the concept it imposes obligations upon us that transcend our preferences.

In our attempt to make sense of our experience we perceive patterns. We integrate a subsidiary awareness into a focal awareness. This is the perceptual dimension of tacit knowing. When conscious agents make tacit integrations they generate meanings – the semantic dimension of tacit knowing. Indwelling a language facilitates reflection. It enables us to formulate abstract ideals – such as truth and goodness. Polanyi views language as the “Open Sesame” to the distinctively human. We give languages a meaning by relying upon our tacit awareness. Language is a tool (an example of the functional dimension of tacit knowing) for deploying our tacit awareness. This dependence upon our tacit awareness does not detach us from realities; it connects us to them. What we believe to be true informs our convictions about what is good. All such judgements are contextual. What is good cannot be captured by a rule. Our judgements are guided by our tacit awareness. In the absence of any shared tacit awareness no agreement is possible. A free society is not a value neutral arrangement; it is a society committed to the assumption that agreement is possible. In the absence of any book of truth however complete agreement must function as an ideal. This is not to say that we ought to treat all judgements as equally valid. It is the claim, as parable of the three rings in *Nathan the Wise* by Lessing instructs us, that truth is not something that creatures formed out of earth can know with any certainty. Now you may conclude that the nihilism that Polanyi believes is causing the destruction of Western Civilisation has come to an end. Nazism is dead. Bolshevism is dead. Is it not the case that those who fought for a free society have triumphed? But if liberty is founded upon nothing more than a refusal to commit then culture death is not far behind.

5.

It is not hard to find intellectuals who urge us to repudiate Western civilisation – moral inversion is alive and well and perhaps stronger than ever. Polanyi views nihilism as the shadow side of the hubris of believing that we can arrive at an

absolute understanding – the standpoint of God. He seeks to return us back to the reality (the glory and tragedy) of being human. This does not mean he wants to set man against God – quite the opposite. But he does seek to counter the vanity of those who claim to know God. The nihilist and the fundamentalist share the idolatry of believing that they have arrived at an understanding (via the reading of texts) that releases them from the burden of accepting the validity of alternative points of view. This plurality, as Hannah Arendt (1958: 7) points out, is the ‘*conditio per quam*’ of all political life. This is the political dimension of the structure of tacit knowing. Polanyi is one of the products of the intellectual ferment that was of fin-de-siecle Budapest; indeed he is arguably its greatest jewel. It is fitting therefore that half a century after the publication of *Personal Knowledge* his insights are being celebrated here today in the city of his birth. It is only now that the magnitude of his philosophical achievement is being comprehended – and it is a task that has still to be completed. \*

\* An earlier version of this paper was read at the conference *Reconsidering Polanyi*, Budapest, June 2008.

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