

# CONVERSION OF KARL AND MICHAEL POLANYI

## AN ANALYSES IN TERMS OF MANNHEIM, SARTRE AND HEIDEGGER

ENDRE J. NAGY

Institute of Mental Health, Semmelweis University  
dr..nagy.endre@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

The essay tries to give an explanation for the conversion of Polanyis. It starts with several sociologies of knowledge (Marx, Mannheim, Goldmann) but they do not provide satisfactory solutions. Therefore the author furthers the investigation to the “existential psychoanalysis” as developed by J.-P. Satre. The particular term of Sartre, the “original choice” proved fruitful by making an intermediary vehicle to Heidegger’s “clearing”. Clearing means being in ek-sistence e.g. in the truth of Being as transcendence of non-authentic life. For the author considers the Heideggerian “forgottenness” as a normative term. Those stepping into the clearing step out of the “everydayness”, and accept the impersonal requirements of Being as formed by successive generations of Mankind. To be converted means to accept these requirements through “intellectual illumination” and putting it in practice.

**Keywords:** conversion, intellectual illumination, speech-act, sociology of knowledge, original choice, authentic way of life, clearing, truth of Being, subject of impersonal Being.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “conversion” has, first of all, a religious meaning that bears on somebody’s finding his or her way from which s/he had made an early shift in this or that direction, but later s/he has returned on the right way where s/he had been at the outset of life. The paradigmatic example of it has always been St. Paul who miraculously converted to Jesus Christ whom he had so far persecuted. Yet, the conversion had not been completed with this, by an *intellectual illumination*. It is necessary to finish it so that one can put into practice of the consequences of the inner *transubstantiation* that we call –after a Hungarian philosopher – a *destiny event* (Tengelyi 1988). This is the stage when one identifies oneself with one’s destiny, and by doing this, we could say, one becomes (by reversing the term contrived in speech-act theory) an *act-speech*, i.e. an act that speaks. When Saul stopped persecuting the Christians in fact and went on to fight for Jesus Christ; when St. Augustine abandoned his concubine; when Georg Lukacs abandoned his former “progressive Idealism” and entered the Communist Party; when István Bibó remained in the Parliament building at the moment when the Red Army seized it, and was conceiving a Memorandum about

the world situation; when Edith Stein ceased to be an assistant of Edmund Husserl and later entered the Carmelite order; when Simone Weil abandoned her Atheist way of life, and gave herself to a particular Christian one: all these happened with speech and act. Therefore we call the second stage of conversion “act-speech” that means in a narrow sense “body-speech”, the body where he is going and does not go, the hand when it moves the pen, that is, the movement in physical terms, what the body does and does not do.

In this essay, I am going to set out of a question in the sociology of knowledge. In what follows I examine the question whether or to what extent any author’s oeuvre, be it scientific, artistic, philosophical or religious one, has been determined by the local and social circumstances into which he or she was born.<sup>1</sup> It was Karl Marx who first jolted the fixed position of the knowing subject described in the Cartesian philosophy, the one whose brain was a „tabula rasa”, an impassive mind, imprinted by the sense data also allegedly supposed to be neutral ones. Instead, Marx made every efforts to show the epistemological subject as dependent on, or rather determined by his or her class interests (See Marx 1965). In the XXth century Lucien Goldmann gave a more sophisticated shape to the Marxist tenet by applying a new method. According to this new Marxist doctrine one has to analyse an artistic, literary and philosophical text in three successive stages: 1. the world view and the text, 2. the spiritual, emotional totality of a group and the world-view, 3. consciousness and psychic life in relation to economic and social life. Implementing this doctrine on Pascal and Racine, Lucien Goldmann could relate the tragic *world-outlook* (taking over the term from the young Georg Lukács) to Sceptical Jansenism, and seemed to prove that the latter was but the ideology of the French court nobility (Goldmann 1965).

At the end in this essay we try to interpret the conversion in a Heideggerian vein for we are convinced that the conception of conversion can add to a new interpretation of the much discussed notion of Heidegger: the clearance.

At the outset of the XXth century Karl Mannheim changes the thesis of class dependency into a non-Marxist formula. In his sociology of knowledge he came to the conclusion (*Ideology and Utopia*, 1926) that the knowing subject is determined not so much by his class interest but by the (social) *Being as such* (Seinsgebundenheit, or in English translation: situational determination). This was a sounder position as compared with the original Marxist doctrine about ideology. Unlike Marx, Karl Mannheim, the founding father of the sociology of knowledge, distinguished a particular group which was able to transcend his *particular* class interest, because

<sup>1</sup> First I attacked the problem of conversion in an essay published in Hungarian: A tettbeszéd (Bibó István 1935-ös “megtérése”) (The speech-act. The “conversion” of István Bibó in 1935) (2001). I partly touched upon the issue in English: ‘The Hungarian Context of Michael Polanyi’s Thought.’(2005).

they detach themselves from their *particular* class situation and break through to a view that is all above the class interests of any kind. This was the “socially unattached intelligentsia” (*freischwebende Intelligenz*) which diving into a common, European and literary cultural heritage, and by making a “distance”, “relationating” themselves from their original and local class dependency and by doing so they would be prompted to represent some “general” interest which is beyond all kinds of class interests. We shall return to his theory later.

## 2. THE APPROACH OF SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

First we have to investigate the actual situation in Hungary where the two Polanyi brothers were born (See Nagy 2005). Since we have already published in English an essay of the Hungarian political and cultural situation at the beginning of the XXth century let us suffice to give a brief account of it. First, the Polanyis were of Jewish extract coming from a family that had become detached from the Jewish religious tradition. Second, both of them become members of the Galileo Circle the first president of which was Karl Polanyi. The Circle had a very anti-religious attitude. Though they did not want to interfere in politics, they believed in a more beautiful future when (as some of them described) “humanity having got rid of its fetters, and goes on with firm steps on the road of justice, of virtue and of happiness” (Kende 1974:80). Instead of God they believed in Science. In Georg Lukacs’ terms, they were “religious Atheists”. Third, they all followed Endre Ady, the greatest poet of that time. Ady revolted against the “Hungarian Fallow” (as he characterised the backwardness of the country), and (as Lee Congdon put it) “he was not a politician or sociologist but poet and prophet of Hungary transformed politically, socially, culturally and morality” (Congdon 1983:56). Fourth, a distinctive impact was made by a curious Hungarian Socialist theoretician, Ervin Szabó who while being a stern Socialist was seeking a moral (a Syndicalist) revolution that would change men from within. Thus on the effects of these factors both Polanyis had been changing throughout the first decade of the last century.

Already in 1909, Karl Polanyi had published an article with the title “The Crisis in our Ideologies”. In this article he said that the next period of the capitalist age would produce more or less stable conditions of material existence, and it would bring about a regulated and stabilized capitalism: he restrictions and limitation on competition, price fixing by public authorities, social insurance etc.

Thus personality loses its importance, the individual is not valued any more according to his ‘individuality’ but according to his ‘sociality’...Consequently in the coming period of a stable capitalism the ruling ideology will be socialist... Socialism returns to its origins, to the middle class...Christianity repeats itself: capitalism exalts socialism

to state-religion precisely as the Roman empire did with the militant religion of the rebellious slaves in Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

For us, this small work is interesting, because it shows that the firm faith seemingly unshakable is getting broken down.

Some nine years later, Karl Polanyi gave an oration at the obsequies for Endre Ady. On this occasion, he underwent a radical change of mind. First, he outlined what they believed so far:

And we believed, it seems, that mankind must adjust to the reality of society, that external things are the real things and that science is the leading light in them. We believed that not men, but circumstances made the war, that responsibility for and guilt in it lies not with us, human beings, but with the circumstances, and that, therefore we ourselves must not change, but the circumstances... For, we believe, with a grimly determined faith that we are unbelievers, that we are the chosen generation of unbelief, that we shall find the promised land of unbelief, the world of perfect institutions and contrivance.<sup>3</sup>

By now, he realized “we only believed that we are unbeliever, for, while professing unbelief, behold, we leave the colours of mourning to the poet, the believing hero, and we ourselves are trying to follow his example in self-sacrifice.”<sup>4</sup> And, he goes on to explain:

There is no science that could alter, only science that will affirm the truth that the bird flies not in accordance with the laws of gravity, but in spite of them, that the tree does not spread in foliage according to the law of creative profusion, that society rises to higher spiritual levels not in accordance with material interests but in disregard of them, and that of human faith, force and self-sacrifice lead us on high, not the downwards pulling gravitational force of material interests, but by force of the hallowed laws of spirit which defy them.<sup>5</sup>

And let’s take a look at Michael Polanyi. It seems that, earlier than his brother, he also underwent a radical change in 1913, when he read Dostoyevsky’s “*Brothers Karamazov*”. In a letter written to Karl Mannheim in 1944 he describes his conversion:

<sup>2</sup> Polanyi, Karl: *The Crisis of our Ideology*. In the Karl Polanyi Institute, Concordia University, Montreal: Box 1, Folder: Hungarian Writings 1918.

<sup>3</sup> Polanyi, Karl: *A Call to the Youth of the Galileo Circle*. In the Karl Polanyi Institute, Concordia University, Montreal. Box: 1., Folder: Hungarian writings 1919.

<sup>4</sup> Polanyi, Karl: *A Call to the Youth of the Galileo Circle*. In the Karl Polanyi Institute, Concordia University, Montreal. Box: 1., Folder: Hungarian writings 1919.

<sup>5</sup> Polanyi, Karl: *A Call to the Youth of the Galileo Circle*. In the Karl Polanyi Institute, Concordia University, Montreal. Box: 1., Folder: Hungarian writings 1919.

As a young boy and young man I was materialist and eager disciple of H. G. Wells. My religious interests were awakened by reading *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1913. I was 22. For the following ten years I was continuously striving for religious understanding and for a time I was a converted Christian on the Tolstoy's confession of faith...My faith in God never failed entirely since 1913, but my faith in the divinity of Christ (for example) has been with me only for rare moments.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, by the end of the tens the brothers became idealists. It was corroborated by Ilona Duczynska, the wife of Karl, who wrote in her memories that "in thought, in world view he stood close to Tolstoy" (Duczynska 1971:93) For, as we have seen in their Atheist period, they were really believers unbelievably, since they choose a faith other than the religious one. As Paul Tillich pointed out that even the humanist faith also a faith (See Tillich 1967). However, any profession of faith, be it in science, or in the changeability of the order of things, or whatever else, is still a faith, and diametrically opposite views easily turns into each other. *Les extrémité se touchent!* - say the French. Rightly! Karl Polanyi, looking back in 1929 on the Circle, emphasizes their "activist idealism" that was running counter to the Materialism of Europe.

To go on new roads – we, the youth saw such ways, as the 'searching for the truth', in contrast to the deterministic Materialism prevailing in Socialism, by representing the new activist Idealism that was quite a new one in Europe at that time. In the question of religion, we did not deny the value of faith - and the Galilean generation was likely the first one being affirmative with faith as a phenomenon - but that of credulity. (Polanyi 1986:189)

Since we have already analysing the conversion by dint of Michael Polanyi's terms "dwelling in" and "breaking out"<sup>7</sup>, we would like to go further in the describing of the conversion by the help of Sartre's so called "existential psychoanalysis", and its central concept "original choice".

### 3. THE ORIGINAL CHOICE

We have seen so far the explanatory strength of sociology of knowledge. We outlined how Karl and Michael Polanyi belonging to the Jewish community in Hungary became converted. We were trying to investigate the effects of Galileo Circle, of the imagined native land or "virtual home", of as supplied by Endre Ady. However these factors can presents us with only a partial explanation. Sociological explanation can

<sup>6</sup> Polanyi, Michael: Letter to Karl Mannheim. Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. Box:4, Folder:11.

<sup>7</sup> See Marx 1965.

be only one thread of the understanding. For we have found the group that can be, to a large extent, relied on an intellectual development, that is life career. This is the last point to which one can attained by the help of sociology of knowledge. To transcend this point we ought to apply for psychology, or rather for he psychoanalysis. It was Freud who carried out the techniques of psychoanalysis that was later transcended by the post- Freudian “superstructuralists” (Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari) who refused the Freudian psychoanalysis and opted for the Id, by trying to point out that the Ego “colonized” the Id that must be liberated (Harland 1988). So, they went on to an extreme materialism, and finally eliminated the centered person from their investigations. As Foucault questioned in one of his writings “*What is the author?*”, in stead of “*Who is the author*”<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, we turn to another philosophical paradigm which puts the subject in the centre of its theory. This is existentialism as expounded by J.-P.Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness*. Not because we would accept all assumptions of his book, especially we do not follow him in his tenet of *absolute liberty* of the Self that he, by the way, also has withdrawn in the *Critique de la raison dialectic*. Nor do we accept his materialism. But we hold his theorem of existential psychoanalysis on the agenda for, first, it rejects the reducibility of the subject to such factors, e.g. will to power or to libido brought to the extreme by Freud; second, by outlining the theoretical status of the term “original choice” as being prior to any logic; and, third, because he denies the complex as being in the unconsciousness, and by doing this, he comes closer to tacit knowledge<sup>9</sup> (which has nothing to do with Freudian subconscious (See Polanyi 1969).

Sartre sets out a laborious account of the differences between the Freudian, i.e. empirical psychoanalysis and his existential, i.e. philosophical psychoanalysis. We do not concern with it in detail, the discussion of its basic tenets will suffice for now. According to Sartre the man is a totality, and his irreducible being consists in that he is the one who gets along at the unification of his many-sidedness uniquely characteristic to him. Well, this unifying act that is acting out by the subject *not* after the act itself but it *precedes* it, is called by Sartre the *original project*. By doing so, the subject chooses the Being, and it is the *original choice* that is expressed in all his manifestations, just as, at Spinoza, substance is manifested in all its attributes. In all trends of subject one has to discover one signification that transcends him. An example to it is if somebody is jealous of a woman at the given time:

...signifies for the one who knows how to interpret it, the total relation to the world by which the subject constitutes himself as a self .I other words this empirical this

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel: *L'archéologie du savoir*. Gallimard. 1969., in Hungarian: *Mi a szerző* (What is the Author?). VILÁGOSSÁG. 1981/7.25-36.

<sup>9</sup> My account of scientific discovery describes an existential choice... To this extent, then, ‘existence precedes essence’ makes a clear reference to Sartre: *L'existentialisme est une humanisme*, that is, „it comes before the truth that we establish and make our own” (Polanyi 1966:80).

empirical attitude is by itself the expression of the “choice of an intelligible character’. If the empirical attitude signifies the choice of the intelligible character ,it is because it is itself this choice. (Sartre 1966: 720)

Since this choice of himself can only be that of Being, the original choice is a project of Being, for it is ontologically a priori as “*a before of all choice*”, and it is that manifested in all empirical tendencies. Sartre goes on to explain:

Empirical psychoanalysis and existential psychoanalysis both search within an existing situation for a fundamental attitude which cannot be expressed by simple, logical definitions because it is prior to all logic, and which requires reconstruction according to the laws of specific synthesis. Empirical psychoanalysis seeks to determine the complex, the very name of which indicates the polyvalence of all the meanings, which are referred back to it. Existential psychoanalysis seeks to determine the original choice. This original choice operating in the face of the world and being a choice of position in the world is total like the complex, it is prior to logic like a complex. It is this, which decides the attitude of the person when confronted with logic and principles, therefore there can be no possibility of questioning it in conformance to logic. It brings together in pre-logical synthesis the totality of the existent, and as such it is the centre of reference for infinity of polyvalent meanings. (Sartre 1966:728)

We are dealing with the original choice as described by Sartre, for we want to identify it with what we consider the first stage of conversion, i.e. the intellectual illumination. All of us have undergone some form of great revelation some time, when our eyes have opened up on the truth, prior of all logic which henceforth determined our course of life. This is the meaning of original choice.

The other relevant moment of Sartre’s doctrine about the original choice bears on the approach of sociology of knowledge but in an encountering sense. As he conceives, the existential psychoanalysis “rejects the presuppositions according to which the milieu make a mechanic effects on the subject in question. The milieu can act upon the subject to the extent that he is able to comprehend it, that is, he transforms the milieu in a situation. No denotation of a milieu does serve anything for us. The milieu considered, as the situation is in the need of the choosing the for-itself, just as that the in-itself is in the need of milieu by his being in the world.” (Sartre 1966:618). This statement while rejecting the mechanical effect of the milieu would be running encounter to the sociology of knowledge if Sartre himself were aware of what is the signification of it. But in the whole book Sartre emphasizes the contingency of the choosing for-itself to the extreme so much that he practically cuts off all the connection of original choice with the milieu, that is, with the bound to Being. However, it is true that in the original choice man has transformed himself but so that he remains identified with himself in the difference. As we have seen the Polanyis while changing from Atheists to Idealists remain faithful to their “bodiless”

ideals believing in what was not tangible. They transform their selves, on the level of faith, (in the world-outlook in our term), but they remain the same on the first level, on the *Weltanschauung*. They still remain Anti-nationalists, they were still sticking to their virtual home in the vein of Endre Ady, and, finally, they still remained allied of the socially handicapped peoples. This is the dialectic of conversion.

The assumption in-itself that the Self is able to transform the milieu to situation transcending the scope of sociology of knowledge can be for us useful for it presupposes an element in the human being that he/she can contrive a plan by himself or herself according to which he/she transforms the reality. And by doing so he/she transforms at the same time him/herself. This act relates the intellectual illumination to practice, or as we named it above, to act-speech.

#### 4. HEIDEGGER ON THE "CLEARING"

Now, let's turn to the interpretation of Heidegger. First of all, the statement that man's task to take care of the truth of Being is not a factual assumption but in my view it is a *normative* one. It can happen or not. As Heidegger says: "The happening of history occurs essentially as the destiny of the truth of Being and from it. But thought in terms of such destiny this says: it gives itself and refuses itself simultaneously (Heidegger 2007.239). In my view the forgottenness of Being can not be only a result of the history of philosophy but it can be "ontogenetic" i.e. individual one as well. This is the way of life of Man who does not stand out into the truth of Being, passing by the clearing, forgetting Being: it is the non-ek-sistence. It goes without saying that the truth of Being, i.e. the coming into the clearing, can be several ones. The Truth of Being reveals when a geographer discovers the reality as yet hidden. He does not make the reality but it disclosed for him: the Being gave itself for him. The truth of Being consists in that it "is" independently of the explorer. When a judge adjudicates a just decision he *found* the law but he did not make it. When Copernicus discovered the heliocentric system, the solar system was in existence well before he discovered it. The Truth of Being once again sent itself for him. In these cases man humbly subjects oneself to something there out that was not made by him. For the truth of Being sent itself for him. As *Dasein* man is standing out into the "undisclosedness" (*Unverborgenheit*) named by the Greeks "alétheia". Therefore: man is not the ruler of Being but shepherd of it.

How does all this meet Michael Polanyi's theory? In connection to the conversion he throws light on the fact that:

Conversion may come to us against our will (as when faithful Communists were overcome by doubts and broke down almost overnight at the aspect of the Russian trials), or –see the example of St Augustine –it may be vainly sought for years by the whole power of volition. (Polanyi 1964:67)



Summing up the result of our Heidegger interpretation: The authentic way of life as described by Heidegger means living in the truth of Being or coming into the clearing (Lichtung) by the fact that one subjected oneself to the requirements of the great intellectual achievement of Mankind (be it science, art, religion, philosophy, etc.). As Michael Polanyi emphasizes it: one has to put for the scientific community his discovery with universal intent. That is personal knowledge (cf. Polanyi 1958) beyond subject and object.

This applies to the conversion of Karl and Michael Polanyi. After having undergone the first stage of conversion (intellectual illumination), both of them became active but in quite opposing directions. Michael Polanyi went in the direction of an anti-Communist activity while Karl Polanyi became an enthusiast of the Soviet Union (see Nagy 1995).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Congdon, Lee. 1983. *The Young Lukacs*. Sapell Hill and London: Princeton University Press, The North Carolina University Press.
- Duczynska, Ilona. 1971. Polányi Károly (1886-1964). *Századok*. 1971(1). 89-95.
- Goldmann, Lucien. 1956. *Le Dieu caché*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Harland, Richard. 1988. *Superstructuralism (The philosophy of Structuralism and post-Structuralism)*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Heidegger, Martin. Letter on humanism. In: Martin Heidegger: *Basic Writings. Revised and expanded edition: Ed. by David Farrell Krell*. Routledge. New York, London. 2007. 213-265.
- Kende, Zsigmond. 1974. *A Galilei Kör megalakulása* [The Formation of Galileo Circle]. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Marx, Karl and Friederich Engels. 1965. *The German Ideology*. London: Routledge.
- Nagy, Endre. 2001. *A tettbeszéd (Bibó István 1935-ös "megtérése")* [The speech-act. The "conversion" of István Bibó in 1935] In: *Megtalálni a szabadság rendjét* [To find the order of liberty], ed. Dénes, Iván Zoltán. 111-145. Budapest: Új Mandátum.
- Nagy, Endre. 2005. The Hungarian Context of Michael Polanyi's Thought. In: *Emotion, Reason and Tradition (Essays on the Social, Political and Economic thought of Michael Polanyi)*, ed. S. Jacobs and R.T. Allen. 7-19. Guilford: Ashgate Publishing.
- Nagy, J. Endre. 1995. After Brotherhood's Golden Age. Karl and Michael Polanyi. In: *Humanity, Society and Commitment*, ed. Kenneth McRobbie. 81-122. New York and London: Black Rose Books.
- Polanyi, Karl. 1986. A Galilei Kör mérlege. [The balance of the Galileo Circle]. In: Polányi Károly: *Fasizmus, demokrácia, ipari állam*. 186-192. Budapest: Gondolat. (First published in *Korunk* 1929(1)).
- Polanyi, Michael. 1966. *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City: Anchor Books.
- Polanyi, Michael. 1969. Sense-giving and sense-reading. In: Michael Polanyi: *Knowing and Being: Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene. 181-207. New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishers Knowing and Being. University of Chicago.

- Polanyi, Michael. 1964. *Science, Faith and Society*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Polanyi, Michael. 1958. *Personal Knowledge*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1966. *The Being and the Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Tengelyi, László. 1998. *Élettörténet és sorseseemény*. [Life history and destiny event] Budapest: Atlantisz.
- Tillich, Paul. 1967. *The Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper and Row