

IN HONOR OF THE 2009 RE-PUBLICATION OF POLANYI'S *THE TACIT DIMENSION*

INTRODUCTION

The following short essays by Phil Mullins and Walter Mead were originally prepared as discussion-starter pieces for an abbreviated breakfast meeting held at the 2009 Polanyi Society Annual Meeting. The real purpose of the session was to celebrate the 2009 publication by the University of Chicago Press of the new edition of Michael Polanyi's *The Tacit Dimension* (with a new foreword by Amartya Sen). It was through the diligent work of Walter Mead over several years (while he was President of the Polanyi Society) that the University of Chicago was persuaded to bring out a new edition of this important but out-of-print Polanyi volume. A number of Polanyi Society members gathered to talk over breakfast about the new edition and, more generally, about *The Tacit Dimension*. The short essays by Mullins and Mead were intended to stimulate that conversation. The essays thus open up—but do not pretend to resolve—some interesting issues related to this Polanyi text, issues about which Mullins and Mead had exchanged e-mail over the course of several years. The papers try to situate *The Tacit Dimension* within the context of the series of lectures Polanyi made in the period after the publication of *Personal Knowledge*. While this 1966 book is purportedly based on the 1962 Yale Terry Lectures, it is especially interesting to look at the text of the book in relation to the 1964 Duke Lectures. Professor John Polanyi has recently given permission to the Polanyi Society to place the Duke Lectures on the Polanyi Society web site (<http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/>) and they are now available there for downloading.

SCATTERED THOUGHTS ON *THE TACIT DIMENSION*, THE TERRY LECTURES AND POLANYI'S DEVELOPING IDEAS

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1. The Jefferson Lectures, McEnerney Lectures and the Terry Lectures

To judge by looking at the published text, it appears that the material that Polanyi says in *The Tacit Dimension* (see the Acknowledgements on *TD*, vi¹) that his book is based upon—namely the Oct. 1962 Terry Lectures at Yale University—is substantially different than the Polanyi lectures that immediately preceded it. That is, the Jefferson or Virginia Lectures (i.e., lectures given when Polanyi was Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the Thomas Jefferson Center in 1961 at The University of Virginia—both names seem to be used in the literature) in the fall of 1961 are followed by the McEnerney Lectures at the University of California, Berkeley in February, 1962. These two sets of lectures are substantially the same. I have checked this by listening to the McEnerney Lectures available on the Polanyi Society web site with the Jefferson/Virginia Lectures in hand.² The Jefferson/Virginia Lectures are available on the Gelwick microfilm (Polanyi gave Gelwick a copy).³ But there apparently was a rather different basic text in the Terry Lectures in October 1962 than that used in the Jefferson/Virginia and McEnerney Lectures. The Polanyi biographers Scott and Moleski suggest that Polanyi, who was resident at The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Science at Stanford as a Fellow in 1962-63, “wanted to make the most of his opportunity at Yale” (Scott 249). He was focusing in on “synthesizing the new insights he had gained into tacit knowing since he had finished *Personal Knowledge*” (Scott 249). This basically fits with the account that Marjorie Grene gives of Polanyi’s philosophical development in the time between *Personal Knowledge* (1958) and *Knowing and Being* (1969) That is, Polanyi is working out his mature theory

¹ Readers should note that although the pagination of the main text of the 1967 Anchor Book edition and the 2009 University of Chicago edition of *The Tacit Dimension* are identical, the pagination of material before the main text is different. Reference in these discussion-starter papers are to the 2009 edition.

² An audio file of the McEnerney Lectures is available for downloading on the Polanyi Society web site at <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/essays.htm>.

³ Richard Gelwick, *Collected Articles And Papers Of Michael Polanyi, Social and Philosophical Writings of Michael Polanyi*, microfilm, Pacific School of Religion, 1963. Inquiries should be directed to Graduate Theological Union Library at <http://www.gtu.edu/library/>.

of tacit knowing. Grene's discussion appears in her 1977 article "Tacit Knowing: Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy," (Grene 1977) as well as her "Introduction" to *Knowing and Being*. (Polanyi 1969: ix-xviii) Polanyi himself comments on the developing course of his ideas in his Introduction to *TD* (xvii-xix) and in the 1964 Preface to the Torchbook Edition of *PK* (ix-xi).

2. Marjorie Grene on the Terry Lectures and/or Drafts of *The Tacit Dimension*

Marjorie Grene seems to have gone into action shortly after the delivery of the Terry Lectures. In a letter to Polanyi dated 13 Nov., 1962⁴ (this and other letters quoted immediately below are in Box 15, Folder 1), she says:

Many thanks for the Terry Lec. mss—have only had time to read I & II—I especially is magnifique—please don't rewrite this too much—it should certainly see the light pretty much as it stands. I am beginning to see my way a bit with emergence too.

A few weeks later (3 Dec., 1962) this follows:

My hasty impression is that only Lecture I of the 3 Terries is ready to publish –I don't think emergence comes off—but please don't take my word for it...

By June 20, 1963, Grene was apparently reading a revised version of the Terry Lectures about which she comments,

I've worried again about the Terry lectures. Michael, you must not publish the expanded TI without very considerable revision. The brief version was brilliant; the present text is so bogged down & cluttered up with stuff that it obscures what you had before made clear... I haven't tried to do any editing of the mss because I thought you'd decided to let it be—but it won't do as it stands—PLEASE.

These comments typify Grene's responses to much of Polanyi's writing, including the Terry Lectures: at times she sharply criticized Polanyi for not being clear but at other times she attacks him for revising and making obscure what had been lucid in earlier drafts! Sometimes Polanyi seems to have taken her advice and sometimes not.

There is one additional undated letter from Grene (written on The Queen's University, Belfast stationary, dated only as "Monday evening," and signed as "M" in Box 16, Folder 8) that clearly is written after the drafting of the Terry Lectures

⁴ Archival material is part of Michael Polanyi Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. Citations to Polanyi archival materials are used with permission and are cited simply by the box and folder number.

but before the publication of *The Tacit Dimension*. It is of interest because of Grene's more concrete criticisms.

I'll keep Ch. II till I get I and III—but would like to try to formulate some of my reactions to it. At first I thought the parallel of the epistemological and ontological structures really came off—but the more I think about it the more it worries me. Not only because of the problems I've mentioned already, but because I don't see how tacit and explicit and higher and lower correspond. Nor for that matter subsidiary and focal, which are different again.

Later in the letter she says:

I think I can see now what you were at in the first lecture, since clearly the structure of tacit knowing must turn out to be not only directed to comprehensive entities but to be itself one kind of comprehensive entity. And though I think the case of doing something skillfully vs. knowing some one else's skill comes off well enough, the sequel presents one with a set of alleged correspondences which don't seem to work except occasionally.

It is puzzling that this last comment is identified as concerned with the "first lecture." I suspect that she meant the "first part of the second lecture or chapter" since this fits better with what we have in both the beginning of the second lecture and the beginning of the published second chapter.

3. The Terry Lectures and The Duke Lectures

How much does the material in the 1962 Terry Lectures change before the publication of *The Tacit Dimension*? Certainly figures like Grene who Polanyi relied on for criticism seem to have wanted some revisions of the lectures themselves and perhaps of the later drafts for publication. Wally Mead, in a discussion-starter essay that follows these reflections, has done some interesting comparisons between the text of the Duke Lectures (spring of 1964) and the published text of *The Tacit Dimension* (1966). To this I can only add a footnote: Polanyi did intend to publish the Duke Lectures with Doubleday/Anchor, but he apparently had already signed some kind of agreement with Yale University Press to publish the Terry Lectures. There are eight letters about Polanyi's difficulties with these two publishers in the Papers of Michael Polanyi (Box 6, Folder 5), although they do not tell the complete story. In March of 1964, Polanyi was apparently just about to receive a contract to publish the Duke Lectures with Anchor, but he must have been asked to send a copy of the Terry Lectures to Doubleday for review (there is a handwritten note indicating the

Terry Lectures had been mailed on an April 15, 1964 letter from Eugene Eoyang, the Doubleday editor to Polanyi). The editor does some comparisons and at first thinks there are no legal problems with publishing the Duke Lectures. But he turns the matter over to his company's copyright lawyers. As the Doubleday editor puts the matter, "The crux of the problem is the interpretation of whether the Duke Lectures are only revisions of the Yale Lectures, or a totally independent enterprise" (May 27, 1965 Letter from Eoyang to Polanyi). Ultimately, the Doubleday lawyers provided an opinion "that several rather serious legal problems would exist were we to publish the Duke lectures without an appropriate agreement between Yale University Press and yourself authorizing such publication" (August 26, 1964 Letter from Eoyang to Polanyi). Yale University Press, of course, never published *The Tacit Dimension*, but Doubleday/Anchor did in the US in 1966 and Routledge and Kegan Paul in London in 1967. The Duke Lectures have never been published although they are now available to anyone interested as part of the collection of Polanyi materials on the Polanyi Society web site.

4. The Terry Lectures, *The Tacit Dimension* and "Comprehensive Entities"

One could compare the text of the Terry Lectures and *The Tacit Dimension* since the text of the Terry Lectures, including some revised versions, is available in the University of Chicago Papers of Michael Polanyi.⁵ I have looked at only the second lecture, which caught my attention a few years ago because it is titled "Comprehensive Entities" rather than "Emergence," the title in *The Tacit Dimension*.⁶ I compared the Terry version and the published text, and it appears to me that the text is basically the same text, although there are some words and paragraphs that differ. I am guessing that the change in title came because Polanyi came to believe that this material was really primarily about "emergence" and whatever he had to say about "comprehensive entities" could be put under that rubric. Early in this material Polanyi is explaining what a "comprehensive entity" is and then moves on toward the end to a discussion of dual control and "emergence." There are a couple of interesting paragraphs on "comprehensive entities" near the beginning in Terry Lecture II that were replaced by what is now the second paragraph of the published text of *The Tacit Dimension*. In the Terry Lecture version, Polanyi argues that a "comprehensive entity" can be "a delicately complex object like a physiognomy, or a delicately complex action, like a skillful performance" (page 1). The point seems to be about the same in the replacing paragraph in the published version, where Polanyi points to what he calls "two kinds of indwelling" (*TD* 30), that involved in sense-reading and that

⁵ The Terry Lecture material is in Box 35, Folders, 6-14.

⁶ This lecture is in Box 35, Folder 11.

involved in sense-giving, to use language in the *KB* essay. Perhaps in the Terry Lectures Polanyi thought it important to point out that there were two kinds of comprehensive entities and later reflection led him to conclude that the heart of the issue concerned two kinds of indwelling.

I was interested a few years ago in Polanyi's development of ideas about "comprehensive entities." This interest grew out of the discussion in *Polanyiana* and *TAD* of "Polanyi's realism"⁷. I argued that "comprehensive entity" is a Polanyian philosophical notion that helps clarify the nature of Polanyi's realism and that it has "polyvalent" (focused on the growth of meaning) and "bodily" (focused on the indwelling of living beings) aspects. In a later essay, I argued for a similar view by suggesting that Polanyi's comments about the "comprehensive entity" and the ontological aspect of tacit knowing should be viewed as late ways to re-articulate and amplify his claims about the active shaping of knowledge.⁸ I connected Polanyi's views (with the help of Grene) to antiCartesian Continental philosophical ideas about being-in-the-world as well as to the peculiar brand of realism in Peirce (and, Peirce says, in the medievals). I traced Polanyi's use of the term "comprehensive entity," suggesting (as Grene argues in *The Knower and the Known* [223]) that the term in *PK* is applied only to living beings (and knowing living beings), who are active centers with tacit powers making achievements (whether simple living forms or complex forms like humans).

But almost immediately after *PK* (e.g., in *SM* in 1959 and in the 1964 Duke Lectures and in several later essays), Polanyi begins to use "comprehensive entity" more generally: sometimes he applies the term to living beings who use their tacit powers to comprehend their environment, but sometimes he uses the term simply to mean any object of focal attention. (i.e., any subsidiarily integrated, or comprehensive, object). Eventually, Polanyi seems to become comfortable using the term "comprehensive entity" to refer to both (1) an object of a person's focal attention, a reality known by relying upon indwelling, as well as (2) a skillful performance by a knower which also requires indwelling and is a type, or aspect, of reality. These are merely two ways of pointing to the same thing. As I noted above, in the second Terry Lecture (recall the lecture was titled "comprehensive entities"), Polanyi says that a "comprehensive entity" can be "a delicately complex object like a physiognomy, or a delicately complex action, like a skillful performance" (page 1) There are other statements by Polanyi from the post-*PK* period that show the same double sense of what a "comprehensive entity" is.

I conclude that the term "comprehensive entity" is a Polanyi term used very commonly in the period after *PK* when Polanyi is refining the theory of tacit knowing.

⁷ See my essays "Polanyi's Participative Realism," *Polanyiana* 6:2 (1997), 5-21 (see especially 16-21) and "The Real As Meaningful," *Tradition and Discovery* 26:3 (1999-2000), 42-50 (see especially 46-47). There are also essays by others on this topic in both this issue of *Polanyiana* and *TAD*.

⁸ See "Comprehension and the 'Comprehensive Entity': Polanyi's Theory of Tacit Knowing and Its Metaphysical Implications," *TAD* 33:3: 26-43.

The term plays a prominent role in *The Tacit Dimension*. Polanyi first works out (expansively in *PK*) his ideas about “comprehending” (which, Polanyi stresses, is an active endeavor of the knower; “comprehending” is referenced many times in the Index of *PK*, but “comprehensive entity” is not in the Index), and then he develops more fully his ideas about “comprehensive entities.” Although this begins in Part IV of *PK* in the discussion of knowing life, where there is a reference (to “comprehensive entity”), much of the development happens after *PK*. Polanyi develops ideas about levels in “comprehensive entities” (or levels of control and boundaries—sometimes dubbed his hierarchical account of reality), and all of this is the “ontological aspect” of tacit knowing which is “deduced,” according to *The Tacit Dimension* discussion, from the functional and phenomenal structures and the semantic aspect of tacit knowing (*TD* 13).