

MICHAEL POLANYI'S LESSENING "RELIANCE ON THE NECESSITY OF COMMITMENT" IN THE YEARS BETWEEN 1958 AND 1966, WITH SPECIFIC ATTENTION GIVEN TO 1964-1966 AND THE PUBLICATION OF *THE TACIT DIMENSION*

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Because Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (*PK* 1958) introduced and developed with detailed explanation most of the major concepts that would continue to characterize his subsequent epistemological writings, it is appropriately regarded as his philosophical *magnum opus*. However, his lectures and publications during the ensuing eight years, culminating in the publication of his *The Tacit Dimension* (*TD* 1966), represented some important further developments in his thought by way of extension, modification, and refinement.

Polanyi had begun as early as 1946, with the publication of his brief *Science, Faith, and Society*, to articulate some of the epistemological questions that motivated his transition from science to philosophy. His invitation a year later to present the Gifford Lectures provided him with the opportunity to formulate, on a far grander scale, his ideas that would eventuate eleven years later in *PK*. The Gifford Lectures themselves consisted of two series of eight lectures each, presented at Aberdeen University in 1951 and 1952. These underwent, yet, six further years of development and refinement before he felt they were ready for print.

The publication of *PK*, followed a year later by his *The Study of Man* (1959), brought Polanyi the professional recognition that immediately, then, launched him on lecture tours in both the United Kingdom and the United States, which allowed him both to summarize and to extend the "post-critical" challenge he was presenting to the established "modern" and "post-modern" approaches then (and still now) dominating academic philosophy. He was so demanding of himself in his preparations for public pronouncements that the reader of his lectures and publications has to recognize a fundamental continuity and consistency in Polanyi's prolific productivity over a period of two decades, from 1946 to 1966. His 1962 Terry Lectures at Yale University are simultaneously reminiscent of what preceded them and anticipatory of what would follow. The painstaking thought that went into the formulation of his thoughts is revealed in his comment in the "Introduction" to *The Tacit Dimension*: "It took

me three years to feel assured that my reply to the *Meno* in the Terry Lectures was right. This has at last been cleared up to my satisfaction in my essay "The Creative Imagination," published in *Chemical Engineering News* (Polanyi 1966), an essay originally written for presentation at Bowdoin College in 1965.

However, because Polanyi's 1964 Duke Lectures are generally considered to represent a decided advancement upon his 1962 Terry Lectures, while still demonstrating continuity in the evolution of his thought leading to his publication in 1966 of *The Tacit Dimension*, my present focus will be upon his Duke Lectures and *TD*. Part of my interest in comparing these two works is to examine the merits of the judgment that has been quite often made that, despite the relative brevity and later formulation of *TD*, the five Duke Lectures actually provide a better introduction to Polanyi's philosophical thought for one who is just starting to read Polanyi.

There is no doubt that, with *PK* representing more than five times the length of the Duke Lectures (approximately 209,500 words to approximately 39,850 words respectively), that the latter is more inviting to the beginner than the former. But the merit of brevity has its limits. Even though *TD*, at about 26,730 words, or two-thirds the length of the Duke Lectures, is the shortest of all three sources, its very compactness makes it comparatively a more difficult read than the Duke Lectures. Further, inasmuch as the Duke Lectures reveal more of Polanyi's rationale that leads into the conclusions he reports in *TD*, the student is allowed to progress in his understanding of Polanyi's ideas as Polanyi himself develops them in the earlier work. It is unfortunate, for these reasons, that the Duke Lectures have not been published.

Further, a number of other interesting thoughts of Polanyi are offered in the Duke Lectures that do not appear in *TD* – considerably more than appear in the latter source but not in the former. Having done a paragraph-by-paragraph content comparison of the two sources, where I have noted the amount of literal overlap and paraphrased overlap between the two works, the following figures are perhaps significant. (Note: Because the more extensive overlap represented by the common themes dealt with in the two sources is not captured by the more measurable and evident literal and paraphrased statements shared by the two sources, this must be taken into account in reading these figures.)

42% of *TD* replicates the Duke Lectures.

-- Chapter 1: "Tacit Knowing" – 45% replicates the Duke Lectures

-- Chapter 2: "Emergence" – 89% replicates the Duke Lectures

-- Chapter 3: "A Society of Explorers" – 26% replicates the Duke

Lectures

29% of the Duke Lectures are replicated in *TD*.

-- Lecture 1: "The Metaphysical Reach of Science" – 0% is replicated in *TD*

-- Lecture 2: "The Structure of Tacit Knowing" – 30% is replicated
in *TD*

-- Lecture 3: "Commitment to Science" – 4% is replicated in *TD*

-- Lecture 4: "The Emergence of Man" – 73% is replicated in *TD*

-- Lecture 5: "Thought in Society" – 38% is replicated in *TD*

The question, however, that interested me most in making a comparative study of these two sources was one that was raised by Polanyi's sole observation, in his "Introduction" to *TD*, regarding an important change of emphasis from his earlier works, *Personal Knowledge* and *The Study of Man*. Because his observation is compact, as is his style throughout the rest of this book, I quote it to some length. (Bold font is mine, to draw you attention.)

Viewing the content of these pages from the position reached in *Personal Knowledge* and *The Study of Man* eight years ago, I see that **my reliance on the necessity of commitment has been reduced by working out the structure of tacit knowing**. 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. Hence thinking is not only necessarily intentional, as Brentano has taught: it is also necessarily fraught with the roots that it embodies. It has a from-to structure.

...[T]hat it is impossible to account for the nature and justification of knowledge by a series of strictly explicit operations appears obvious . . . without invoking deeper forms of commitment...

...[W]hen originality breeds new values, it breeds them tacitly, by implication; we cannot choose explicitly a set of new values, but must submit to them by the very act of creating or adopting them.

...[T]he existentialist claim of choosing our beliefs from zero is now proved absurd... Thought can live only on grounds which we adopt in the service of a reality to which we submit." (2009 *TD* xvii-xix).

To be sure, a simple comparative word count indicating the relative frequency of the word "commitment" (and its variations) as it appears in *PK* and eight years later in *TD* underscores Polanyi's pronouncement of his lessened reliance on this concept. The word "commitment" appears more than two hundred times in *PK*, but only about twelve times in *TD*. Even when we adjust for the much greater length of the earlier book, it appears only half as frequently in the later book. Indeed, in *PK* we find an entire chapter devoted to "Commitment" and none in *TD*. But the question that interests me is not addressed by Polanyi in his "Introduction" to *TD*

-- namely: Can we detect a significant lessening of reliance on commitment between the Duke Lectures in 1964 and *TD* in 1966?

A comparative word count indicates that the word "commitment" (and its variations) appears about eighteen times in the Duke Lectures and about twelve times in *TD*. When we adjust for the relative lengths of the two sources, we find that the frequency is identical: 1/20th of 1 % of the total words in each. This finding should not come as a surprise to us if we note that in his 1964 "Preface" to the Torchbook edition of *PK*, issued in that year, Polanyi observes:

My later writings, including a new book on press [presumably, *TD*], are less occupied with the justification of our ultimate commitments and concentrate instead on working out precisely the operations of tacit knowing. Once knowing by indwelling is seen to work everywhere...; and once the logic of tacit knowing expands into a theory of creative thought... our growing familiarity with ubiquitous indwelling brings about the unquestioning acceptance of the paradox that all knowledge is ultimately personal. (*PK* xi).

It appears that Polanyi's de-emphasis on the "necessity of commitment" had occurred after the writing of his 1962 Terry Lectures--even though these were credited by Polanyi in his "Introduction" to *TD* as having provided the rudimentary structure for that work--and by the time he formulated his intervening Duke Lectures. In the earlier works, Polanyi gave much attention to the importance of positing and remaining faithful to one's fundamental beliefs, or "fiduciary commitments," that is, to choosing wisely so that one can then be faithful in one's "allegiance" to one's own choices. But the reader can easily detect even as early as in *PK* a tension between statements such as these and the emerging *from-to* logic of tacit awareness.

However, even as the logic of tacit awareness comes to dominate that of commitment, individual choice and commitment, like the incidence of the words themselves, do not disappear. One must still make the decision whether or not to indwell, to fully participate in, the wealth of one's experiences, to acknowledge (to use Heidegger's phrase) one's being-in-the-world, whether to be open to new and perhaps even disrupting--or "breaking-out" experiences. One's involvement in being and knowing, as in the act of discovery, is not a completely passive experience; it remains personal and participatory.

Still Polanyi becomes, in his later works, more aware of the intrinsically compelling logic of tacit awareness and of tacit intimations, once one has opened himself to experiencing, or indwelling, them. I'm reminded of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in which the "prisoner" is compelled, or "drawn" up the steep slope of the Cave into the outside world where he gains a greater comprehension of the Truth--although, still not a perfectly clear comprehension, and still (although this receives less emphasis by Plato) subject to error. Thus does Polanyi speak of the person in the process of discovery being drawn along a "gradient" of greater awareness and discovery

occasionally in the earlier works but more often in the later ones. Therefore Polanyi reminds us, especially in these later works, that “the existentialist claim of choosing our beliefs from zero is... absurd.” (TD xix) And,

Originality is commanded at every stage by a sense of responsibility for advancing the growth of truth in men’s minds. Its freedom is perfect service... [T]he knower is controlled by impersonal requirements. His acts are personal judgments exercised responsibly with a view to a reality with which he is seeking to establish contact. (TD 77).

In this sense, “thought has intrinsic powers, to be evoked in men’s minds by intimations of hidden truths” (TD, 83), and “the growth of thought intrinsically limits our self-determination everywhere.” (TD 84)

Since Phil Mullins has extended this contrast between Polanyi’s earlier and later works to demonstrate a corresponding ontological shift from the concept of a “comprehensive whole” that initially has only a limited referent, describing our full understanding of the human being, to a greatly expanded concept that defines the ultimate purpose of our unending quest as an understanding that encompasses no less than the whole of our being-in-the-world--that is, of the whole of existence itself--I leave the reader to read Professor Mullins’ insightful “Comprehension and the ‘Comprehensive Entity’: Polanyi’s Theory of Tacit Knowing and Its Metaphysical Implications” (Mullins 2007).

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