

KNOWING AND BEING: PERSPECTIVES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF MICHAEL POLANYI

Review on the Book Knowing and Being: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Michael Polanyi, ed. Tihamér Margitay. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

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ABSTRACT

This volume contains thirteen papers which were presented at a conference held in Budapest in 2008 at the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Personal Knowledge*. Most of these essays are excellent examples of contemporary Polanyi scholarship, and they can be interesting and useful for not only Polanyi experts, but for those who are interested in any areas of philosophy.

The volume has two parts: the first (*Knowing*) is devoted to Polanyi's theory of knowledge, the second (*Being*) includes essays about interpretations of his metaphysical views. Among the essays we can find both analytical and historical interpretations. The authors come from different nations and different scholarly fields. Most of the them examine Polanyi's views in both contexts, and attempted to give both philologically and philosophically reasonable interpretation of his complex and original views. The title of the book refers to a collection of papers of Michael Polanyi which was published with the same title in 1969.

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Although many excellent scholarly monographs have already been published about Polanyi's philosophy and life, still there are few significant collections of cutting-edge essays of Polanyi scholarship. This volume contains thirteen papers which were presented at a conference held in Budapest in 2008 at the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Personal Knowledge*. The title of the book refers to a collection of papers of Michael Polanyi which was published with the same title in 1969.

The volume has two parts: the first (*Knowing*) is devoted to Polanyi's theory of knowledge, the second (*Being*) includes essays about interpretations of his metaphysical views. Among the essays we can find both analytical and historical interpretations. The authors come from different nations and different scholarly fields: there are philologists who specialized in Polanyi, philosophers of science,

phenomenologists, and analytically trained epistemologists also. Most of them examine Polanyi's views in both contexts, and attempted to give both philologically and philosophically reasonable interpretation of his complex and original views.

It is almost impossible to precisely classify Polanyi's unique philosophy. Partly because the effort to put a simple label on his work, he is often mentioned as one of the 'post-positivist' philosophers of science. Though this description is not entirely misleading, it is worth keeping in mind that Polanyi's theory of knowledge cannot be separated from his views about being, morality, freedom, values, the role of the science in society and other questions.

Although the thirteen papers mostly deal with knowing and being (namely, Polanyi's theory of knowledge and metaphysics), the authors analyse Polanyi's views about liberty, moral values of science, his contribution to social sciences, his ideas concerning evolution, philosophy of mind, artificial intelligence, and many other topics.

In the following I would like to present short summaries of some of the essays. I don't want to go through all of the thirteen papers of the volume, rather I would like to introduce some of the papers according to the different issues. However, as I have mentioned before, we have to keep in mind that Polanyi's views about various topics are closely related to each other.

The first essay, *Michael Polanyi's Use of Gestalt Psychology*, is a great example of a mixed approach of analytical and historical interpretations. It's well known that the discoveries of Gestalt psychology play a central role in Polanyi's philosophy. Phil Mullins gives a lucid and deep analysis of the development of Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge, and investigates how Polanyi has used and transformed the insights of Gestalt psychology at different periods. Furthermore, Mullins examines historical and conceptual connections between Polanyi's epistemological views which are inspired by Gestalt psychology, his early criticism of planned science and totalitarian state, his vision of a society of free explorers, the views of two different kinds of order, and his late conception of meaning.

Polanyi's idea of tacit knowledge is probably the most widely known one of his ideas among philosophers and the laity as well, however numerous popularized and oversimplified formulations still remain. Iwo Zmyślony's paper, *Various ideas of tacit knowledge - Is there a basic one?* examines various interpretations of Polanyi's philosophy and dispels some widespread misconceptions about tacit knowledge. Zmyślony gives a deep account of different usages of Polanyi's central concept in different writings.

Built on a very thorough inquiry of the texts he distinguishes two basic ideas of tacit knowing. First, he refers to the knowledge of subsidiary particulars of experience. Second, it means the knowledge of how we integrate the indwelt particulars. The integration is a skill, and like art, it cannot be formulated in entirely explicit ways. Zmyślony interprets these two basic concepts in various contexts. He

compares Polanyi's conception of tacit knowledge with Kuhn's insights, and analyses Polanyi's ideas in relation to the externalism-internalism debate as well.

Of course, Zmysłony is not the only contributor who looks for relations and similarities between Polanyi's views and other philosophical traditions. One of the greatest virtues of the volume is that it initiates a dialogue and explores possible connections between Polanyi's philosophy and the most significant trends of 20th century thought, such as analytical philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, social science, and economical theories.

The similarities between Polanyi's conception of tacit knowledge and Ryle's distinction of 'knowing what' and 'knowing how' are well known. But it is important to note that Polanyi himself declared connections between his ideas and other philosophical traditions, for instance phenomenology. It is very remarkable that Polanyi claimed his notion of 'indwelling' is the same as (or at least very similar to) Heidegger's concept of 'being in the world'.

Yu's paper, *Being-in-the-World in a Polanyian Perspective* examines the similarities between Heidegger's phenomenological criticism of Cartesian and positivist epistemology, and Polanyi's conception of tacit knowledge. Both of them criticized the classical philosophical distinction between the theoretical and practical sphere. Yu argues that the very similar insights of the two approaches are able to support the conclusions of each other and challenge the representational view of human cognition which is inspired by Cartesian dualism and theory of ideas. He outlines possible ways of an exciting and fruitful dialogue not only between Heidegger and Polanyi, but also with Ryle, Wittgenstein, Merlau-Ponty, and with contemporary thinkers, for instance Charles Taylor, or Hubert Dreyfus.

The next essay, *A Rose by another Name? Personal Knowledge and Hermeneutics*, explores further interesting connections between Polanyi and other philosophical traditions. Mulherin points out surprising similarities and analogies between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Polanyi's theory of knowledge. Gadamer's main problem is to elaborate a different view of understanding the truth in humanities and arts which contrast with the positivist view of science without falling into subjectivism.

Polanyi also points out that seeking the infallible foundations of knowledge usually involves the view that the criterion of truth and the methodological rules of justification are objective, universally valid, therefore, impersonal. Although the two thinkers did not seem to be familiar with each other's works, both of them opposed to this kind of objectivist view of knowledge, as well as they pointed out that fiduciary commitments, skills, appealing to tradition and authority play essential role in human cognition.

Apart from these two interesting papers, in the volume we can find essays which interpret Polanyi's philosophy in context of problems of analytical philosophy. Pro and contra arguments about reductive physicalism and its viable alternatives, such as property dualism already have a huge literature, nevertheless Polanyi's concept of

emergence and his criticism of reductionist theories of mind are less known among the analytical philosophers.

Márton Dinnyei's essay (*Downward Causation, or the Tacit Character of the World? Approach to a Non-Reductive World-view through Polanyi's Philosophy*) is an excellent example for applying Polanyi's original ideas to the discussions of analytical philosophy of mind. He summarizes Kim's argument, according to which downward causation is an untenable consequence of non-reductive physicalism, hence a kind of moderate reductive physicalism is the only viable position. However, Dinnyei argues for an alternative view built on Polanyi's ideas of an hierarchical ontology.

The main question is whether Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge supports his emergentist ontology. Polanyi claimed that knowledge of the higher level entities is not reducible to knowledge of lower entities. According to his famous example: Laplace's demon who has a complete knowledge of microphysical entities, but has no capacity of integrating it to a knowledge of meaningful units, is not able to recognize a frog as a frog.

Then Polanyi concludes from his theory of knowledge that the world has layered ontological structure. The organisms, like machines, are higher-level emergent entities, and instead of nomological causal laws we need organizing principles to understand these entities. Dinnyei accepts Polanyi's views, and argues that Kim's objection about downward causation is harmless against this theory.

The editor of the volume, Tihamér Margitay's essay (*From Epistemology to Ontology: Polanyi's Arguments for the Layered Ontology*) examines and reconstructs Polanyi's argument for layered ontology built on his views of tacit knowledge. He gives a very lucid and profound analysis of Polanyi's arguments. Margitay's strategy is internal criticism, which means that he argues appealing to Polanyi's own claims. Opposed to Dinnyei, Margitay concludes that Polanyi didn't give sufficient and good reasons for his conclusion of the correspondence between structure of knowing and structure of being. The bridge between epistemology and ontology is fragile. However, Margitay argues, a weaker thesis can be defensible: the correspondence between the structure of personal knowledge and the ontological features of persons. So if Polanyi's theory of knowing is correct, then it is safe to say that the "knowledge-like entities" (i. e. persons) are emergent in a metaphysical sense.

The concept of emergence is the subject of Dániel Paksi's essay, *Polanyi and evolution* too. Paksi summarizes Polanyi's views about evolution and emergence. He claims that Polanyi's idea about hierarchical ontology is a consequence of his concept of boundary conditions, and argues that Polanyi's fundamental distinctions between living and non-living, machine-like and physical entities can be established. Built on Polanyi's views Paksi argues for a different theory of evolution opposed to the neo-Darwinian paradigm. Paksi states that a Polanyian theory of evolution can provide a better understanding of the emergence of life.

Polanyi made significant contribution not only to philosophy of science or epistemology, but also other fields of philosophy, such as moral philosophy, aesthetics

or political philosophy. Among the essays of the volume we can find several fine ones which examine Polanyi's ideas about morality, values, and society. These thoughts, of course, are related to his views about knowing and being.

It is an old problem how can we give a comprehensive understanding of the nature of moral knowledge and its relation to theoretical knowledge. Paul Lewis's essay *Teaching to form Character: A Polanyian Analysis of Practical Reasoning* offers an interesting solution. Lewis presents Polanyi's views of tacit knowing, and compares them with the classical Aristotelian views of practical reasoning (*phronesis*). He points out similarities between classical virtue ethics and Polanyi's ideas. Knowing cannot be formulated by explicit rules of justification. Knowledge is based on tacit skills which are acquired by the example of a tutor. Similarly, *phronesis* is a skill which is developed through practice by following a model. Lewis argues that Polanyi's conception of tacit knowing helps us better understand the nature of practical reasoning, and outlines a promising theory built on Polanyi's insights.

R. T. Allen's paper, *Emotion, Autonomy and Commitment* is a short and exciting summary of a possible criticism of modern views of autonomy and the role of the emotions, built on Polanyi's idea of tacit knowing. Allen presents Sartre's radical concept of autonomy, according to which we are able to and have to be totally and absolutely free by choosing ourselves (i.e. our beliefs, ideas, commitments). Allen claims that this concept of autonomy is analogous with some of the ideas of Enlightenment, especially with Kant's concept of morality.

Built on Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge Allan argues that this radical concept of autonomy is incoherent. The argument goes like this: the above view of freedom is empty because without appealing uncritically to authority, tradition, customs, or emotions reasoning and choice would be impossible. Sartre's man, who seemingly has a totally free, self-choosing will, actually could not exist. The wholly self-determining person cannot will anything, for reasoning and acting always presuppose uncritically accepted tacit beliefs. Every choice is necessary based on principles which always remain unchosen. Polanyi argues that everybody tacitly, therefore, uncritically relies upon some fundamental beliefs as well as trusts in reliability of perception and reasoning. As Allan points out, emotions have an essential role in Polanyi's views of knowing and action. According to the theory of tacit knowing we cannot think or live without emotions because every belief or act are inevitably attached to implicit desires and commitments.

Márta Fehér's essay, *Polanyi on the Moral Dimension of Science* examines how the moral dimension of science is established by Polanyi's theory of knowledge. She summarizes Polanyi's post-critical, anti-Cartesian theory of knowledge and his ideas about pure science as an essential truth-seeking practice. Fehér finds Polanyi's ideas of science a spiritual, idealistic description of a community of free intellectuals who are passionately committed to seeking the Truth. Knowledge cannot be without morality and rationality because knowing inevitably has a moral character. The justification

of the claims of science are not based on impersonal, abstract methodological rules, but tacit moral rules which committed by a community of scientists.

Science doesn't need to have special obligations to society because it is only concerned with the deeper understanding of nature. Seeking the truth in favour of truth itself is the essential goal of science. It can follow and accomplish this goal only if it remains free from every social, economical and other external interests and influences. Scientists must have an autonomous community with their own rules and autonomous direction.

Additionally, Fehér investigates the present day condition of science which is usually called after Ziman as post-academic science. She invokes Polanyi's warnings of dangers of economical influences to science. In the era of post-academic science trust in science, and therefore, science itself might be put at risk, when scientists serve only technological and economical interests as well asand science becomes an instrument of profit-oriented and practical needs, instead of seeking the truth itself.

Apart from the essays which I have introduced in the foregoing, there are three additional excellent papers in the volume. David W. Rutledge's essay *Individual and Community in a Convivial Order, or Polanyian Optimism* analyses the relation between the individual and the community from the viewpoint of Polanyi's post-critical theory of knowledge.

Paul Richard Blum's paper (*The Immortality of the Intellect Revived: Michael Polanyi and his Debate with Alan M. Turing*) is worth reading not only for Polanyi scholars, but for historians of medieval philosophy as well as philosophers who are interested in artificial intelligence.

The last essay of the volume is Walter Gulick's *The Social Thought of Karl and Michael Polanyi: Prologue to a Reconciliation*. Gulick compares the views of Polanyi brothers about economics and society, and points out not only the differences between their ideas, but interesting connections as well.

My goal was no more than to give an appetizer of the book, and I hope I have managed that. Most of these thirteen essays are excellent examples of contemporary Polanyi scholarship, and they can be interesting and useful for not only Polanyi experts, but for those who are interested in any areas of philosophy.

Nevertheless, I think an introduction which gives a short outlook of Polanyi's thought in a more popular style would have made the volume perhaps more helpful for readers who had just started studying Polanyi's philosophy. But it is important to note that the aim of the book was to give a high-quality collection of scholarly papers which are presented in an international Polanyi conference, and in my opinion, the volume well fulfils its purpose.

In the end of the book a list of contributors with their contacts and a detailed index makes the volume complete.