

Talking About What We Cannot Know

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I hope to make some progress on the question of why Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) is neglected¹ by professional philosophy; I will approach the question from the viewpoint of three of his near contemporaries, Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), Marjorie Grene (1910-2009), and Stephen Toulmin (1922-2009). They are chosen because I have read them fairly deeply and all three have expressed some criticism of Polanyi. I use the term “neglected” rather than ignored—most of us are appropriately ignored by that profession—because I think there is a fairly strong case to be made that he should not be ignored. It is a case that I cannot make, but Grene’s 1977 plea for him to be respected,² and Mary Jo Nye’s book³ handle that problem nicely.

Isaiah Berlin. I don’t remember the year I began to read Isaiah Berlin; it was when he first appeared in the **New York Review of Books**. What

¹One way to understand the place of Michael Polanyi in philosophy today is to search for courses that focus on his contribution. Without taking up that tedious task, I would argue the neglect is obvious from the fact that he is not an entry in the 2006 edition of the **Encyclopedia of Philosophy** nor in the online **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy**.

²Grene, Marjorie (1977) “Tacit Knowing: Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy” **Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology**, Vol. 8, No. 3, October, pp. 164-171. One might hope that the combination of Marjorie Grene’s tawdry treatment by the profession and her finally becoming—at the age of 90!—the first woman honored in the Library of Living Philosophers might result in a reconsideration of her plea.

³Nye, Mary Jo, (2011) **Michael Polanyi and His Generation: Origins of the Social Construction of Science**. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

he wrote about politics and political philosophy struck me right off as sensible and important; I believed him. About 20 to 25 years ago I read, always with great satisfaction, a number of his essays for a course I taught. By contrast, I only began reading Polanyi in the last 10 years.⁴ Because Berlin was, as I read him, always polite and because he never spent energy arguing with others, I was shocked to read Berlin's put down of Polanyi: ". . . a great scientist giving up a Nobel to write mediocre works of philosophy."⁵ The authors describe this comment as ironic; I would call it snide but not ironic. If it is ironic, the irony is to the second or third power since Berlin himself explicitly disavowed being a philosopher (he modestly described himself as at most an historian of ideas); furthermore, it is Berlin, not Polanyi, who has an entry in the online **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy**. In my view, there is no reason to think that Berlin was not serious about both parts of that quotation, particularly since people knowledgeable about physical chemistry believe the first part. My guess is that the "mediocre works" Berlin had in mind were Polanyi's forays into the history of ideas, particularly his explanation of the rise of Marxism, Berlin's forte. I am in no position to go any further than that guess. However, although Polanyi never says so explicitly, I suspect he believed that the rise of Marxist and fascist Nihilism was due to the decline in religious belief, European Christian belief. I would be surprised if Berlin, Toulmin, or Grene (and add Jacob Bronowski for good measure) would agree with that judgment. Personally I would love to know how Polanyi would react to the rise of Islamic-inspired—"Islamic-excused?—Nihilism."⁶

⁴ Elizabeth Anderson, a University of Michigan professor of philosophy, told me I would enjoy him and she was right.

⁵ Scott, William Taussig, Martin X. Moleski, S.J. (2005) **Michael Polanyi**. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁶ And we should not forget that Tamils, not "Islamists," invented the modern suicide bomb. Were the Tamils nihilists or just desperate patriots?

Marjorie Grene. Professor Grene, with refreshing frankness, tells us why she thinks Polanyi was not better received by the profession. Professor Mary Jo Nye summarizes her view much better than I can:

“She [Grene] had severe misgivings about the fourth section and especially the last chapter of *Personal Knowledge*. She did not at all like the theistic hints and Christian overtones, including the use of the Fall and redemption scheme and the analogy between Augustine’s faith and the scientist’s faith. For Grene, a sense of historical contingency and fallibility was lost at the end of *Personal Knowledge* when Polanyi slipped into ‘ontological dogmatism’ and a ‘hopelessly anthropocentric evolutionism’ followed by his closing Christian apologetic. The notion of a ‘stratified universe’ was unconvincing, she thought, as was his cosmology of emergence. In 2005, she told an interviewer, ‘He hadn’t a clue about evolutionary theory. He didn’t think that neo-Darwinism could be right at all . . .’”⁷

I have no idea what percentage of active philosophy professors have read **Personal Knowledge**, but I would venture a guess that about 80% of those have read it agree with Grene.

Stephen Toulmin. We know much more about Toulmin’s views of Polanyi than we do of Berlin’s, and Toulmin’s are much more negative than those of Grene. They begin with his 1959 hostile review of **Personal Knowledge**.⁸ Cute phrases like “highly gifted amateur” and “explanatory fictions” dot the young Turk’s review. The heart of his criticism is that “. . . the philosophical relevance of his suggestions [not insights! WCB] needs to be demonstrated.” Almost certainly Polanyi’s quick “dismissal” [Toulmin’s term] of Wittgenstein, Toulmin’s mentor,

⁷ Nye, Mary Jo. *Op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁸ Toulmin, Stephen (1959) “Book Reviews” **Universities Quarterly**. Vol. 13 (Issue 2) pp. 212-216.

was important to that appraisal. Polanyi completely missed the fact that both Wittgenstein and Toulmin were his natural allies, as Toulmin rightly observed. Professional philosophers may see those allies as predecessors who should have been acknowledged.

Forty years after that book review, Toulmin is much more willing to give credit to Polanyi, as is clear in his book **Return to Reason**:

“As a physical chemist with experience on both the practical and theoretical sides of scientific work, Polanyi was one of the first writers to say, unambiguously, that much of what natural scientists know or take for granted ‘goes without saying’ because there is no occasion to mention it explicitly in published papers. Such papers (he saw) report only a small fraction of the information we need if we are to follow their arguments in full detail. The things that go without saying are familiar to both authors and readers. If questions are raised about them, the authors may at first hesitate to reply, and then begin, ‘Oh, I see what you mean. . .’: though articulate about such matters, they are not fully at ease with them. This tacit dimension of knowledge (as we shall see) is not relevant only to scientific work: in early life, we all learn to deal with situations in ways that involve habituation rather than explanation. Whether this involves behaving politely in company or mastering the multiplication tables, these kinds of learning are effective, without our being able to explain why we have reason to trust them; and, if this is true of the things that other people teach us, it is true even more of the skills we acquire in dealing with the world by ourselves, so that we do not even need to be taught them.”⁹

⁹ Toulmin, Stephen (2001) **Return to Reason**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 178

Notice that Toulmin describes what *is not said* rather than Polanyi's what *cannot be said*; few students of Polanyi would consider this to be Polanyi's contribution to epistemology. There is confirmation of Toulmin's limiting the scope of Polanyi's contribution in a later chapter: "What holds good for Pierce, Polanyi, and Feyerband in the philosophy of science does not necessarily hold true for epistemology in general (p. 186)." I take this to mean that Toulmin did not see tacit knowing as a seminal contribution to epistemology.

The last chapter of Toulmin's **Return to Reason** is titled "Postscript: Living with Uncertainty." This phrase agrees with how Polanyi saw the intellectual life; yet Polanyi gets no mention here. If we are in a "post critical" age, as you and I and Polanyi think we are, it is clear that this philosopher did not see Polanyi as introducing it: "If Rene Descartes is a symbolic figure marking the beginning of the Modern Age, we may take Ludwig Wittgenstein as marking its end. (p. 206)"

This statement requires some discussion of Polanyi's views of Wittgenstein and some explanation of why Toulmin sees Wittgenstein as such a towering figure. Fortunately for me, in Polanyi's books Wittgenstein is only referred to twice, on page 87 and pages 112-114 of **Personal Knowledge**.¹⁰ On page 87 Polanyi explains that his own attempts to "speak of the ineffable" may be thought to offend against the Cartesian doctrine of clear and distinct ideas. He considers that

¹⁰ I think I have read close to all of Polanyi's articles that are not about physical chemistry without finding any other mention of Wittgenstein, but I may be wrong. I consider that Polanyi's failure to mention Wittgenstein in his "Background and Prospect" introduction to the 1964 edition of **Science Faith and Society** highly significant. It was certainly written after Polanyi had read Toulmin's review of **Personal Knowledge** and Polanyi takes pains in that introduction to mention various writers "whose conclusions overlap," including Toulmin and Jacob Bronowski (whom Scott and Moleski report Polanyi did not respect, *op, cit*, p. 280). To me this is strong evidence that not only was Polanyi not convinced by Toulmin that Wittgenstein was an intellectual ally, but also the disrespect toward Wittgenstein that I detect (see below) in his 1958 comments continued into 1964.

Wittgenstein's concluding item in the **Tractatus** to be an aphoristic transposition of that Cartesian doctrine:

'Of what cannot be said'—i.e., said exactly, as a sentence in natural science—'thereof one must be silent.'

Polanyi's injected interpretation is warranted as is clear from the Preface to the **Tractatus**; whether Polanyi's speaking of the ineffable needs defending from Wittgenstein's quarter is doubtful. So I will proceed to Polanyi's other reference to Wittgenstein. A long quotation is warranted (pp. 112-113):

"Different vocabularies for the interpretation of things divide men into groups which cannot understand each other's way of seeing things and of acting upon them. For different idioms determine different patterns of possible emotions and actions. If, and only if, we believe in witches may we burn people as witches; if, and only if, we believe in God will we build churches; if we believe in master races we may exterminate Jews and Poles; if in class war, we may join the Communist Party; if in guilt, we may feel remorse and punish offenders; if in guilt-complexes, we may apply psychoanalysis instead; and so on.

"Modern writers have rebelled against the power exercised by words over our thoughts, and have expressed this by deprecating words as mere conventions, established for the sake of convenient communication. . . . Our choice of language is a matter of truth or error, of right or wrong—of life or death.

"The understatement that language is a set of convenient symbols used according to the conventional rules of a 'language game' originates in the tradition of nominalism, which teaches that general terms are merely names designating certain collections of

objects—a doctrine which, in spite of the difficulties admittedly attached to it, is accepted today by most writers in England and America, in abhorrence of its metaphysical alternatives.”

What is expressed in these three paragraphs and why is it expressed with such vehemence? Polanyi begins with an eloquent statement of the power of words in the opening two sentences.¹¹ How deeply was the next sentence felt? Just remind yourself that he, a Jew in Germany, certainly listened to Hitler live haranguing the Master Race, and could never forget the consequences. He had relatives and knew officials and scientists executed by the followers of Marx. He is disturbed that “modern writers” view words as “mere convention” when words can kill. Then he reveals not who those writers are, but who their leader is, by the phrase “language game,” a phrase unique to Wittgenstein. I think I understand Polanyi’s scorn for these efforts. Let me explain.

From their meeting in 1951 Grene tried to help Polanyi “catch up” in philosophy. Probably as a consequence of that, Polanyi read both Wittgenstein’s **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus** and **Philosophical Investigations**.¹² It happens that in the 1950s I was a Jesuit seminarian at St. Louis University studying scholastic philosophy. George Klubertanz, the Jesuit professor I most respected, told a small group of us that, in spite of his own inability to understand Wittgenstein, he thought that he might turn out to be the most important philosopher of the 20th Century. It was a strange statement never forgotten by me. But except for an enduring interest in epistemology and philosophy of science I did not follow it up until I read Ray Monk’s biography **Ludwig**

¹¹ The first two sentences of the first paragraph seem to sketch an inchoate theory of the relationship of language and groups and actions, which, if taken seriously, distract from his point. Don’t values and beliefs [and hatred!] divide people and vocabularies follow from them?

¹² Polanyi refers to both of these books in **Personal Knowledge**. I see no evidence that he casually referred to any sources without trying to understand them fully. He did a prodigious amount of research between 1951 and 1958 as evidenced by his citations.

Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius in 1990. Monk agreed with Klubertanz! Inspired, I began trying to read Wittgenstein. I read a good deal without much understanding. Then I read Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's [!] **Wittgenstein's Vienna**; that book helped me understand him by sketching his intellectual milieu. I also read Ray Monk's **How to Read Wittgenstein** which I consider an indispensable crib. When I learned about Toulmin from his obituary, I read several of his books, not because they explained Wittgenstein, but because his epistemology and philosophy of science was believable to me.

Based on the contents of those books about Wittgenstein's thinking and on my own fumbblings with what Wittgenstein wrote, I would venture the following: In 1914 Wittgenstein believed that if we just understood logic, the classic philosophical problems would disappear. During his service at the front in the first World War as an artillery sergeant in the Austro-Hungarian army (for which he had rashly volunteered), without any notes or books, he composed the **Tractatus** to accomplish that goal. After it was written he began to understand that, without its being wrong or in error in any conventional sense, the book completely failed in that purpose. When he reluctantly returned to academe and philosophy, he spent the rest of his years at Cambridge struggling, reasonably inarticulately, with language and its mysteries. I am convinced that Polanyi's fundamental epistemological insight, that all knowledge is undergirded by belief, simply "went without saying" in the two books of Wittgenstein's writings available to Polanyi, ironic as that is. My best evidence for this is the works of Wittgenstein's best student, Toulmin.¹³

¹³ For a proper understanding of what Wittgenstein was up to in his study of the "language game" see Ray Monk, **How to Read Wittgenstein**, *op. cit.*, "Chapter 8: Language Games," pp. 69-82. Marjorie Grene tells us that there was a convergence in the thinking of Wittgenstein and Polanyi which, she confesses, neither she nor Polanyi suspected when she was working with him: **A Philosophical Testament**, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Thus when Polanyi read Wittgenstein's two books, especially his second book, without the benefit of the three books that helped me understand the person, he unsurprisingly judged them to be at best an insulting total waste of time.¹⁴ Not a judgment analytic philosophers are likely to respect.

After reviewing these criticisms of Polanyi I must sadly conclude that I am not surprised that Polanyi is neglected. Let me conclude with a wonderful paragraph from **Personal Knowledge** that I think Berlin, Grene, Toulmin, and Wittgenstein! would all agree with:

“We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework. (p. 266)”

¹⁴ In Grene's **Philosophical Testament**, (op. cit., p. 125) I ran across the following: “Polanyi used to say, if you want to know about the presuppositions of a given field, spend five years in the laboratory of one of its leaders.” Should this advice not apply as well to philosophy?