

The Post-Critical Turn
(How and Why Post-Critical Inquiry and Criticism Is Different)

- 1) I'd like us to reflect together on what the Post-Critical Turn is all about, with which Polanyi sought to identify his philosophical efforts. He identified with what we are calling "the post-critical turn," but he did not claim it as unique to his philosophy. His explicit references to it refer to it as a larger cultural movement.
 - a) How has the post-critical turn been identified so far in the conference? What ideas or notions have been brought to light for you by Wednesday's discussion?
 - b) What ideas or notions do you have about it that haven't yet been mentioned? Have there been aspects overlooked or omitted? What questions do you have that have not yet been fully addressed?
- 2) I'd like to have us think about the post-critical turn in ways we perhaps have not thought about before.
 - a) Consider this story, entitled "Pluralism," from *Listening to Your Life* (HarperCollins, 1992), consisting of a collection of excerpts from the writings of Frederick Buechner compiled by George Connor (p. 328). It tells of a time when Buechner was a visiting teacher at Harvard Divinity School for Winter Term 1982. Ask yourself: Have you had any experiences similar to this?

"Harvard Divinity School was proud and justly so, of what it called its pluralism—feminists, humanists, theists, liberation theologians all pursuing truth together—but the price that pluralism can cost was dramatized one day in a way that I have never forgotten. I had been speaking as candidly and personally as I knew how about my own faith and how I had tried over the years to express it in language. At the same time I had been trying to get the class to respond in kind. For the most part none of them were responding at all but just sitting there taking it in without saying a word. . . . There I was, making a fool of myself spilling out to them the secrets of my heart, and there they were, not telling me what they believed about anything beneath the level of their various causes. It was at that point that a black African student got up and spoke. 'The reason I do not say anything about what I believe,' he said in his stately African English, 'is that I'm afraid it will be shot down.'"

Afraid of being shot down . . . [Note how this fear is of an attack *ad hominem*, usually voiced in a condescending way, such as "When you express beliefs like that, you don't belong among us who are elite, enlightened, modern, Harvard educated intellectuals."]

This calls to my mind a Danforth Foundation Conference to which I was invited along with at a hundred or so recipients of fellowships from across the U.S. administered by the Danforth Foundation in the Summer of 1976. This was 10 years after I had received a Kent Fellowship (administered by Danforth) while in residence at Duke University. The purpose of the conference, as I understood it, was to evaluate how consequential had been the Foundation's investment in their fellowship programs in support of values in higher education and whether these programs should be continued. In a group of Kent Fellows that I spent a day with sharing personal stories, a particularly remarkable consensus emerged: in the context of academic life to which they had been exposed

over the previous 10 years, they had each experienced a lack of welcome to, even a hostility toward, and an eventual loss of the intimations of meaning and value commitments that had powerfully and perhaps naively motivated them into graduate study and academic life in the first place. Acquiring a modern critical mind in that context over the past 10 years had been for most of them a devastating personal loss and disappointment which few had survived intact. Many had lost their way, lost track of the trajectory on which they had been launched when they entered graduate study.

“Afraid of being shot down.” Brief Comments? Questions? Similar experiences?

b) To this situation and circumstance, what has Polanyi to say? Consider these four quotations, all taken from *Personal Knowledge*:

- i) *PK 269*: “It has been taken for granted throughout the critical period of philosophy that the acceptance of unproven beliefs was the broad road to darkness, while truth was approached by the straight and narrow path of doubt. We were warned that a host of unproven beliefs were instilled in us from earliest childhood. That religious dogma, the authority of the ancients, the teaching of the schools, the maxims of the nursery, all were united to a body of tradition which we tended to adopt merely because these beliefs had been previously held by others, who wanted us to embrace them in our turn. We were urged to resist the pressure of this traditional indoctrination by pitting against it the principle of philosophic doubt. Descartes had declared that universal doubt should purge his mind of all opinions held merely on trust and open it to knowledge firmly grounded in reason. In its stricter formulations the principle of doubt forbids us altogether to indulge in any desire to believe and demands that we should keep our minds empty, rather than allow any but irrefutable beliefs to take possession of them. Kant said that in mathematics there was no room for mere opinion, but only for real knowledge, and that short of possessing knowledge we must refrain here from all judgment. The method of doubt is a logical corollary of objectivism. It trusts that the uprooting of all voluntary components of belief will leave behind unassailed the residue that is completely determined by the objective evidence. Critical thought trusted this method unconditionally for avoiding error and establishing truth.”
- ii) *PK 268*. “The alternative to this, which I am seeking to establish here, is to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs. We should be able to profess now knowingly and openly those beliefs which could be tacitly taken for granted in the days before modern philosophic criticism reached its present incisiveness.”
- iii) *PK 365f*. “[W]e must now go back to St. Augustine to restore the balance of our cognitive powers. In the fourth century A.D., St. Augustine brought the history of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating for the first time a post-critical philosophy. He taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must

strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*. . . . 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.”

- iv) PK 267 “[St. Augustine’s] maxim *nisi credideritis non intelligitis* . . . says, as I understand it, that the process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic, and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in the light of which we approach it; a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis.”
- c) What do the story, or these two stories, & the quotations from *Personal Knowledge* imply about the post-critical turn? (Try to keep comments short at this stage.)
- i) If the Modern Critical methodology generates in response “the fear of being shot down,” what does a Post-Critical methodology do to counteract or avoid it? Or to substitute for it?
 - ii) In different words, how does Polanyi’s conception of the Post-Critical strategy for investigating and examining any topic differ from the strategy of Critical Thinking to which these naïve young academics at HDS and at the Danforth Foundation conference had been exposed?
- 3) In the remainder of my presentation, I pose and address three topics, inviting your discussion:
- **First, what, practically speaking, as Polanyi speaks of it, does ‘the post-critical turn’ involve? A shift from what to what? How should it be characterized?**
 - **Second, what can we say are the marks of post-critical thought as an ongoing movement (a shared ethos) that is larger than Polanyi, though represented by him, a movement that antedates Polanyi (comes before him), and continues beyond and subsequent to Polanyi? And who would you suggest, besides Polanyi and persons directly influenced by Polanyi, belongs to it?**
 - **Third, what does *thinking post-critically* look like—as in *thinking critically in a post-critical way*? How would you characterize the post-critical attitude or posture? (What are its essential elements?)**
- a) **First, what, practically speaking, does ‘the post-critical turn’ involve? A shift from what to what?**

Some suggestions: From doubt and suspicion to belief and trust. From invulnerability to vulnerability. From presumption to possession of truth to humility and acknowledgment of fallibility. From withdrawal and detachment to involvement and indwelling. From abstraction in the ‘theater of solitude’ to involvement in concrete context, community, and ongoing traditional practice. From intellectual combat (“hard ball”) to conviviality. . . .

- b) **Second (though what we have already said begins to address this), what would you say are the marks of post-critical thought as an ongoing movement (a shared ethos) that is larger than Polanyi, though represented by him,** a movement that antedates Polanyi (comes before him), was contemporaneous with him, and continues beyond and subsequent to Polanyi? (They need not be shared by all in this movement.) [And who says similar things?] Take note: this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Some important aspects may have inadvertently been left out.

- (1) Recognition that the source of knowledge, of coming to know, of *discovery* (and whatever lies beyond that), lies in *believing and trusting in indeterminate intimations of meaning (many of which may be only partly articulate)* which we apprehend in our own persons and rely on them to lead us forward. This is true of knowing and inquiry as a dynamic process leading to discovery in all areas, in all disciplines, in all cognitive practices.
- (2) Awareness and acknowledgment of *the tacit dimension*, the tacit context background to, the objects and concerns of our focal attention, in which are rooted the indeterminate intimations of meaning just mentioned – again, in all areas, in all disciplines, in all cognitive practices. Tacit knowing has a from-to structure (including what Walt Gulick has dubbed *from-via-to* structures) with subsidiary roots (that from which we attend), many of which can neither be rendered focal nor explicit. What we know in knowing what we know is always more than we can tell, always more than we can easily make explicit (for ourselves as well as for others) or fully justify. Not just in what is subsidiary to our understanding, and presuppositions on which we are relying, but also in the indeterminate intimations of still other aspects of what we know and understand that testify of its realness and substantiality.
- (3) All knowing in all areas, in all disciplines, in all cognitive practices centrally and crucially involves the *personal participation* (to varying degrees and diverse manners, largely tacit and often undetected by the observer) of the knower. That is to say, the knower quite literally enters into, pours herself into, indwells, extends himself/his mind into the world, enacts) in exploring, deciphering, and determining the nature of the known. This participation, that Polanyi calls *the personal*, is a special kind of subjectivity (I think Polanyi wants to make it ontologically distinct from other kinds), an impassioned and disciplined subjectivity, an emergent responsible subjectivity, crucial to apprehending reality in its transcendence. Note that when an observer of the knower moves from outside the knower’s commitment situation to inside it empathetically, the knower’s body

changes from body-object to body-subject, from something opaque to a kind of transparency in continuity with our own lived and knowing body. I am convinced that this is not just a phenomenal change in appearance, but a change in which we see more profoundly what is there and going on; for our knowing thus extends into and through the other's point of access to reality, and shares in her or his indwelling of the world.

- (4) In all such knowing, *we do make Contact with Reality in its transcendence from us in our own person*, and establish connections with it, relating to it in a relationship of first person acquaintance. We are not stuck within a Cartesian inner sanctum cut off from external reality with only purported representations of the real in our mind (such that only a third person scientific expert could possibly determine our relations to the real). On the contrary, the real is indicated by its indeterminate future manifestations (the IFM effect) to us. The perceptual shift from opacity to transparency as we enact our perceptual integrations such that what has been attended to becomes attended from/indwelt (and thus incorporated into our body-as-subject) enables our touch to reach the thing itself. Tacit knowing is thus at its heart personal acquaintance with reality, rapport with it, relational knowing. What is the nature of this shift from opacity to transparency? It is something more than phenomenal only; it is in some sense ontological. Representations are no longer mediators that come *between* us and the real but transparent means by which we extend our reach to the real itself. The from-to relation becomes **first-person** encounter (the 'ontological aspect' of tacit knowing), an extension of the body's boundary into and through our tools and instruments to the thing itself. This is a radically important move on Polanyi's behalf in which the mere subjective becomes the personal (compare Merleau-Ponty). Again, I am convinced that this is not just a phenomenal change or a change in description, but an emergence.
- (5) This conscious, aware, embodied/incarnate person is not only in contact with reality but is *ensconced and rooted in the world, in community, in culture, in history, biologically emergent—and thus is empathetically knowable by others*. Although invisible to the focally attending scientist, the attending/integrating/enacting incarnate agent-knower is present but not focalizable, not specifiable to (or within) the 'natural standpoint.' The knower is thus knowable in her knowing via empathetic indwelling. Note: the knower's body is transformed and made transparent, as a system of indwelt particulars; a 'window' onto her or his experience of the world, onto the world as the other experiences it, and as aspects of the world make themselves known to us through her. Knowing thus has a particular location, a particular history, in a nexus of particular relationships with others: here in the most concrete of all places—the here of one's own body and its place among other places, persons and things and their inter-relationships.
- (6) All of this *prioritizes a Methodological Faith animating all of our knowings that is rooted in a community of persons, of traditional practices, and*

oriented in accordance with a firmament of (self-set) ideals and standards. In Polanyi's words, "the process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic, and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in the light of which we approach it; a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis." Note here that for post-critical thought there is no radical division between natural science investigation and investigation within the human sciences and the humanities, across the full spectrum of the liberal arts. As far as access to reality is concerned, there is a continuity across the disciplines; no discipline has privileged access that would trump other disciplines or should be thought of as trumping them.

- (7) The possibility of genuinely knowing other minds/other persons/other cultures makes empathy a primary and transcendental instrument of knowing the world. *Others too have access to the real and thus transparently extend our own access to the real through empathetic knowing and mutual recognition of the same transcendent reality.* This is where Conviviality and Convivial Knowing fit into the post-critical turn. Our path to the universal passes through others. That is what lies behind Polanyi's conception that claims are made with *universal intent* rather than presumed universality; his conception is not a mere concession to the impossibility of attaining absolute universality. (Where Polanyi calls it "universal intent," Merleau-Ponty calls it "lateral universality." [See Merleau-Ponty's *Signs*]) Note how Modern Critical thought distortedly characterizes and mistakes the role of others in our knowing as less than they are, conceiving them as subjective and not as personal—which is to say, not as transcendental means of access to objective reality, to reality as transcendent. Knowing the other, exploring their perspectives (getting at what they glimpse), knowing them from within what Polanyi speaks of as their "commitment situation" in a shared knowing, is an essential dimension of Polanyi's revised conception of objectivity, a commonsense objectivity, as opposed to the impersonal conception of objectivity in scientism.
- (8) All of the above, of course, opens up virtually limitless possibilities of *knowing, appreciating, and enjoying non-human animals and other hierarchically emergent life forms.*
- (9) Despite all of this, *our grasp of reality is ever fallible, ambiguous, uncertain, indeterminate, and never to be rendered fully explicit with precision.* Of necessity we resort to metaphor, symbol, and indirect communication—not as occluding or obstructing our access to reality but as enabling us further access to the real, specifically to less-specifiable and non-specifiable aspects of what is known. The Cartesian ideals of absolute certainty and univocal explicitness are impossible and false ideals, both misleading and distorting when pursued.
- (10) As Polanyi puts it, "*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.” This is where meaning, the meaning of our place in the universe, post-critically understood, is to be found.

b*) Who else, what other thinkers, and what other ideas than Polanyi's, do you think might be considered as also contributing to post-critical thought and falling under the post-critical paradigm? (They do not have to know of Polanyi or his work.) Many will hold to one or more of the list given above. Not all would likely agree to the entire list. Are there *some* you would suggest?

- (1) Existential Phenomenology, Being-in-the-world in Husserl, Heidegger, especially Merleau-Ponty. Contra privileging “the natural standpoint” (i.e., the third-person standpoint as Husserl understood it, where the subject-knower-mind lies always outside the things being considered.
- (2) The Extended Mind and Alva Noë (Matthew Crawford and “Outside the head”), Daniel Hutto and Enactivism, The turn against Perceptual Representationalism in Cognitive Studies.
- (3) The Hermeneutic Turn to Interpretation (vs seeking Explanation only), and the influence of culture and situation. Hans Goerg Gadamer.
- (4) Women's Ways of Knowing and Blythe Clinchy.
- (5) The Participative Turn in Religious Studies and Jacob Sherman.
- (6) “The Believing Game” and “the Doubting Game”) and Peter Elbow.
- (7) The Rhetoric of Assent and Wayne Booth.
- (8) “Subjective Thinking” and Soren Kierkegaard.
- (9) Persons in Relation in Martin Buber, John Macmurray, and Gabriel Marcel.
- (10) Personalism in Medicine and Paul Tournier
- (11) The Focusing Movement and Thinking at the Edge with Eugene Gendlin.
- (12) The Spirituality of Knowing and Parker Palmer.
- (13) Biological Emergence Studies, and the work of J. J. Gibson among others
- (14) European Philosophical Anthropology and Adolph Portman
- (15) The Critical Realism Movement in contemporary Sociology with Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, Philip Gorski, Doug Porpora, and Christian Smith.
- (16) Dissolution and Wholeness and George Morgan.

c) **Third, what does thinking post-critically look like—as in thinking critically in a post-critical way? How would you characterize the post-critical attitude or posture? (What are its essential elements?) What kind of a relationship does a post-critical thinker exhibit toward other persons and other persons' thinking?** I would like to have you consider that critical thinking (as a method that we practice and would teach our students) pursued in a post-critical manner will look different. How will it be different than conventional critical thinking? In what ways? What does post-critical criticism look like?

Some tentative thoughts and suggestions from me:

- (1) In light of the story with which I began my remarks, a post-critical approach to critical thinking seeks to avoid the prospect and the threat of “being shot down” or of generating animosity. The point is not to defeat the other, to win out in debate, but deliberately to aim at cultivating intellectual hospitality and conviviality—where each participating party to the conversation is ranged around a matter in common where each party begins with a representation differing from the others (possibly incompatible), and further to undertake to make sense in common between the participants in virtue of the fact that each represents an independent perspective on this matter.
- (2) Whereas a critical approach advances by doubt and suspicion, forcing the other to justify and prove her position, her representation of the matter in question, for it to merit credibility and possess the right to be believed; a post-critical approach, to the contrary, advances by faith and trust in the intimations of meaning and truth that lie behind its own representation of matter in question and simultaneously allows the other party (and gives room for them) reciprocally to advance by faith and trust in the intimations of meaning and truth that lie behind their representations. Note that this way of conceiving the situation distinguishes between each party’s representation of the matter in question and the (transcending) reality of that matter. It also distinguishes between each party and her or his representation; the person is more than, and knows more than, and is open to knowing more than, the representation she claims to be true. Post-critically approached, the reality in question is always more than the representations being claimed about it, and than the persons who presume to know it. No one has absolute possession of it; the grasp of each on it is fallible and partial. Map (the representation we have of it) is not territory (the reality in question). Post-critically understood, reality transcends every representation, every map—but that does not mean that maps can never be true (more or less, in some respect or another) of reality. Keeping this in mind helps us to keep in check our reflex capacity (ingrained in us as modern critical thinkers) for suspicion and doubt toward whatever idea or claim or belief is unfamiliar and apparently alien.
- (3) Therefore, whenever possible, we should grant the benefit of doubt and uncertainty toward the other and her ideas and acknowledge our own fallibility, partiality, and limited understanding. She may know something that we don’t and that transcends our present understanding. We should avoid caricature and condescension and always seek to respect and honor the other person, and the other point of access to reality-in-common embodied in that person. Don’t forget that reality is always more than, and other than, our present understanding. That is why when voicing our convictions, as Polanyi advises, we should affirm them with *universal intent* versus with a presumed universality. Remember that the universal is approached only through the other (via dialectical inquiry) and thus through the other’s point of access to reality-in-common between us.

Remember too that, for her to move forward, the other will be (ideally) operating on the basis of Augustine's strategy too (exploring the topic in the light of an exegesis of her own beliefs). That is why we should aim for mutual recognition in virtue of the respective differences involved, versus trying to find a common denominator or a single conceptual framework continuous with which either party is starting. There may indeed be a place for doubt and suspicion, but only in balanced, creative tension with, and subordinate to, methodological faith and trust. [See Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries* (Oxford University Press, 1987), where he advocates practicing "the believing game" in creative, dialectical tension with "the doubting game."] Recall that reality, according to Polanyi, is ever fraught with surprising aspects that out-run our representations, and other knowers may be in a better position than we are to notice them.

- If this exhibits a Post-Critical attitude, what is the usual Critical attitude?
- (4) If we (both we and other parties) are to progress in our respective understandings of reality, we need to distinguish as well between our maps-focally-considered and our maps-subsidiarily-indwelt in the effort to extend the reach of our perceptual acquaintance with the world. In other words, we need to look not to the map but to the transcending reality beyond, the reality intimated by, though not exhausted by, the map. This is intended as advice both to us and to our interlocutors: doing this may help them to begin to take in what our map is indicating though perhaps not fully representing and help us to begin to take in what their maps are indicating though perhaps not fully representing. In this respect, it may help to realize that this kind of a dialogue will likely not be something assimilable to traditional formal logic which operates within a single, conceptual framework and frame of reference. On the contrary, it more than likely will involve non-reversible shifts from one conceptual framework to another, and perhaps back and forth and messing with the explicit boundaries and definitions, in the hope of coming up with a more comprehensive frame of reference.
- If this exhibits a Post-Critical attitude, what is the usual Critical attitude?
- (5) Reality is multifaceted, much more than our maps may suggest. So also, our maps are perspectival, limited by the context out of which they have been constructed and are being interpreted. That is why we need to be in convivial and dialectical conversation with other knowers of the realities with which we are concerned. In principle, at least, they too have access to these realities in their own persons, and we, as we engage in empathetic rapport with them, can gain some of the access (or some insight into the access) they have and glimpse more of the facets of these realities that are not accessible by our present access alone.
- If this exhibits a Post-Critical attitude, what is the usual Critical attitude?

- (6) Accordingly, we must not only have faith in the intimations of reality afforded by our own access to it (in part, reminded to us by our map), but faith too in intimations of that same reality afforded by the other's access—sometimes even when their faith in that access is weak, discouraged, or absent. At times we may be able to encourage or even 'prime the pump' by helping to articulate part of what it is that they do not presently have words for (as in "Is ____ what you are trying to say, or is it something else?").
- If this exhibits a Post-Critical attitude, what is the usual Critical attitude?
- (7) My remarks so far speak of practicing thinking critically in a post-critical way, regardless of the content. Does anything change when the content is itself finding fault with Critical Thinking and trying to introduce the other to Post-Critical Thinking (not necessarily with Critical Thinking as a whole but simply with some aspect or expression of it)? Do any of you have thoughts or suggestions on this question?
- Here for the most part, I believe, it is a matter of bringing to light the tacit background, context, and from-to structural subsidiary elements and presuppositions that shape in both positive and negative ways our own thinking and that of the other we are engaging.
 - To do this effectively, it requires, and over time contributes to, a conviviality that is welcomed by all sides.
 - As I think about it, isn't our model here Polanyi himself and his writings?
- (8) We should not be too quick to invoke or avow the Post-Critical paradigm in a context that is closed and hostile to it. What Kierkegaard called "mastered irony" may have a place in protecting ourselves (temporarily withholding and keeping under wraps our own convictions) and in getting past the other's defenses.
- (9) We should maintain confidence, trust, faith in (and being true to) the tacit wellsprings of your own post-critical passions when under fire, and also confidence in her own access in principle to the realities in question beyond her current understandings.
- (10) What other suggestions come to mind for you about pursuing critical thinking in a post-critical way?

Concluding Summary

- We began with sharing brief short reflections about the workshop and conference so far on the theme of the Post-Critical turn.
- Then I introduced a couple of stories of crisis situations which I believe call for the Post-Critical Turn, paired with a few excerpts in Polanyi's own words from *Personal Knowledge*.
- I posed three topics and ventured some of my own ideas about them, inviting your collaboration. First, what does the P-C Turn involve? A 'turn' of what to what? Second, what are the marks of the P-C movement? There are, of course,

Polanyi's ideas and for the most part we have been occupied with them, but who else besides Polanyi and what else besides his ideas exemplify it? What ideas overlap or converge with his? Third, what does critical thinking look like when practiced in a Post-Critical manner? How would teaching a course, say, on "critical thinking" be different when taught in a Post-Critical way? And what would Post-Critical criticism be like? On this latter topic, I am more tentative. There have not been many attempts at addressing it and I hope not to be the last.

There occur to me three remaining questions:

1. Does the post-critical presuppose the critical in some respects, and in what way or ways? Is movement from the pre-critical (traditional, pre-modern) to the post-critical possible without going by way of the critical? Is post-critical faith different from a pre-critical faith?
2. How does post-critical thought relate to post-modern thought? (Deconstructive P-M vs Constructive P-M?) What similarities, what differences?
3. What can the post-critical turn contribute to the re-kindling of intellectual passions once they have been compromised or possibly given up and lost as a result of having acquired a modern critical mind?