

The Study Group on the Unity of Knowledge and the Late Polanyi Interest in “The Effect of the Scientific Outlook on History”

Gus Breytspraak and Phil Mullins

Our presentation is one with three interwoven threads or themes. You might think of these themes as something like a three-ring circus. However the action unfolding in any one ring seems to be also part of the action in the other two rings. This is a presentation that helps clarify how Polanyi’s late career (roughly 1964 until 1976) was bound up with his ongoing relation with M. Grene, his late hope for a renaissance of public interest in his account of modernity, and his declining health and intellectual powers. This turns out to be a very complicated story.

(1) We began this project as an effort to extend our 2016 Nashotah Conference presentation on the 1965 and 1966 Bowdoin College Conferences put together by the Ford Foundation-funded Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity (SGFCU). We focused on how the SGFCU came together and Polanyi’s important role in it, as well as Grene’s work with Polanyi in shaping the SGFCU. Although it is not necessary, if you wish to read or scan our rather detailed written essay analyzing the SGFCU, send Mullins (mullins@missouriwestern.edu) an e-mail asking for a pre-publication copy (forthcoming in a *Polanyiana*). Our 2018 Nashotah presentation is an effort to extend this earlier work to consider the successor Study Group for the Unity of Knowledge (the SGUK, again funded by Ford from 1967-72), Polanyi’s more limited role in this group and Grene’s increasing leadership role.

(2) There are many facets of the SGUK and an array of interesting material on it. There are a number Ford Foundation archival documents as well as about 350 documents in the Grene-Polanyi material in the Michael Polanyi Papers (MPP) that often have some bearing on the SGUK. We have focused in on Polanyi’s late interest in organizing a European SGUK meeting, which he, in one letter to Marjorie Grene (17 July 70, Box 16 Folder 5, MPP), identified as a gathering to examine his account of “The Effect of the Scientific Outlook on History.” This was a meeting that was planned but did not actually occur. Why it did not occur is only partially clear. Nevertheless, Polanyi was preoccupied by the late sixties with the prospect of having intellectuals discuss—and perhaps supplement—his reading of intellectual history. To put this in

a nutshell, this projected meeting seems to have been all about publicizing and critically examining Polanyi's "moral inversion" thesis. In some ways, Polanyi seems at the end of his career to have regarded "The Effect of the Scientific Outlook on History" as the key to everything important. Grene's role in helping Polanyi organize a European SGUK meeting on this topic is an interesting and ambiguous role. There are many questions about why Polanyi seemed so intensely focused on this topic. If you want to read or scan (and we don't insist) an account of the SGUK, Polanyi's role in it and Polanyi and Grene's effort to organize a 1971 meeting focusing on Polanyi's account of "The Effect of the Scientific Outlook on History," it is [here](#). Polanyi's interest in "The Effect of the Scientific Outlook on History" is perhaps best reflected in his late articles "[Why Did We Destroy Europe?](#)" and "[Science and Man](#)" published in 1970. If you wish to read or scan these articles (and we don't insist), a copy is available under the title link. Polanyi's late intense focus on modern intellectual history is the context for considering the Meaning Lectures (1969, 1970 and 1971) and the book *Meaning*, which Prosch put together at the stage Polanyi was intellectually very frail.

(3) The third thread in our presentation is somewhat more amorphous: it concerns the incredible level of Polanyi's scholarly activity late in life and his great hope that his philosophical work would initiate a cultural transformation. This coincided with the decline of his intellectual powers. The letters to and from Grene make very clear that Grene is deeply involved with Polanyi as he reached the end of his intellectual life. She, of course, has her own complicated life (and personal problems) and intellectual endeavors and projects, including the SGUK, to manage. Nevertheless, she continued to work with Polanyi on ideas. Often she did not agree with Polanyi and often she seems to recognize Polanyi's failing powers and tried to help him sort things out or rely on someone else to do so.