

## **A Polanyian Account of Concessive Knowledge Attributions**

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Fallibilism is the doctrine that a person can have knowledge even though it is epistemically possible that the person's belief is false. Concessive knowledge attributions (CKAs) are statements of the form 'I know that p, but it's possible that not p'. Such statements express fallibilism, but they also sound odd to many people.<sup>1</sup> This fact has been used by some people as evidence against fallibilism leading many fallibilist to give an account of CKAs.

In the mid-twentieth century Michael Polanyi, a scientist and philosopher, put forward his own fallibilist epistemology he called personal knowledge. His epistemology stressed the importance of the role of the person and the importance of commitment in knowing. In this paper I will show that Polanyi's account can give an account of CKAs. Part one of this paper will give a brief summary of the role of commitment in Polanyi's thought, and part two will apply Polanyi's notion of commitment to CKAs.

### **Polanyi's Fallibilism and the Role of Commitment**

That Polanyi is a fallibilist is seen clearly enough through the many statements he makes throughout his book *Personal Knowledge*. In the preface Polanyi writes, "Personal knowledge is an intellectual commitment, and as such inherently hazardous. Only affirmations that could be false can be said to convey objective knowledge of this kind."<sup>2</sup>

Later in the book, Polanyi informs the reader that "The principal purpose of this book is to

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<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), vii-viii.

achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false.”<sup>3</sup>

Central to Polanyi’s epistemology is the fact that knowledge is not impersonal and detached. The personal aspect of knowledge is found in the desire to know (intellectual passions) and in the personal judgment of the person as to what beliefs to hold. Knowing is an art that cannot be guided by strict and explicit rules. This personal judgment is not subjective because it submits to the standard of objectivity:

We observe here a mutual correlation between the personal and the universal within the commitment situation. The scientist pursuing an enquiry ascribes impersonal status to his standards and his claims, because he regards them as impersonally established by science. But his submission to scientific standards for the appraisal and the guidance of his efforts is the only sense in which these standards can be said to pre-exist, or even to exist at all, for him. No one can know universal intellectual standards except by acknowledging their jurisdiction over himself as part of the terms on which he holds himself responsible for the pursuit of his mental efforts. I can speak of facts, knowledge, proof, reality, etc., within my commitment situation, for it is constituted by my search for facts, knowledge, proof, reality, etc., as binding on me. These are proper designations for commitment targets which apply so long as I am committed to them; but they cannot be referred to non-committally. You cannot speak without self-contradiction of knowledge you do not believe, or of a reality which does not exist. I may deny validity to some particular knowledge, or some particular facts, but then to me these are only allegations of knowledge or of facts, and should be denoted as ‘knowledge’ and as ‘facts’, to which I am not committed. Commitment is in this sense the only path for approaching the universally valid.<sup>4</sup>

The knower, acritically accepts certain standards of truth and trusts these to hold universally (e.g. scientific standards).<sup>5</sup> The judgments and assertions of the knower must submit to these standards. In short, he makes a commitment. In committing himself to an assertion, the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 214

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 302-303

<sup>5</sup> Thus for Polanyi, knowledge necessarily involves a fiduciary framework. This fiduciary framework is not arbitrary, it is based upon the community of inquirers (e.g. the scientific community, the philosophic community, etc.)

knower is asserting that his belief satisfies these universal standards and will lead to further discoveries or “contact with reality,” He is committed to these standards and holds that his judgments upholds them. Thus, we can see that Polanyi understands knowledge to be a type of commitment which relates the personal and the objective/:

Hence to accept the framework of commitment as the only situation in which sincere affirmations can be made, is to accredit in advance (if anything is ever to be affirmed) affirmations against which objections can be raised that cannot be refuted. It allows us to commit ourselves on evidence which, but for the weight of our own personal judgment, would admit of other conclusions. We may firmly believe what we might conceivably doubt; and may hold to be true what might conceivably be false.<sup>6</sup>

### **Concessive Knowledge Attributions**

Assuming Polanyi’s epistemology, we can analyze concessive knowledge attributions in terms of commitment. This understanding of knowledge gives us an interpretation of CKAs that can explain their oddity, even while maintaining that they are often true and an expression of fallibilism. To begin let us begin with a statement that is clearly a statement of commitment but not a CKA. Imagine the groom in the midst of a wedding ceremony. The priest asks him if he wishes to take “this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, do you promise to love, honor and cherish her, for as long as you both should live.” Imagine the man answers, “I will, but it’s possible I won’t.” Such a statement is obviously similar to a concessive knowledge attribution, and would be regarded by most people as sounding quite odd. But why? The statement the man made is clearly a true statement. With the divorce rate as high as it is, it is certainly a possibility that the man will fail in keeping his vow. In saying, “I will,” the man is making a commitment. In saying that it’s possible that he won’t keep his commitment, the man is also uttering something true, but in doing so he signals to the listener

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid. 312

that he is backing away from his commitment, or is less than serious about it. Unless the man is harboring serious doubts or lacking sincere intentions there is usually no reason to utter such a statement, and the utterance will strike most listeners as odd in most situations.<sup>7</sup>

Now imagine the scenario in which my brother has just been accused of murdering our father. I neither witnessed the crime nor could supply an alibi for my brother. I run into a friend at the supermarket and he asks if I have heard the news. I reply, “Yes, but I know that my brother didn’t commit the murder.” It is obvious that I do not have infallible knowledge of my brother’s innocence. Instead, I have a certain view of my brother’s character, and it is my commitment to his character that leads me to say that “I know my brother didn’t commit the murder.” If instead I had said, “Yes, but I know he didn’t commit the murder, though it’s possible he did.” My friend would take me as expressing a significant doubt, signifying a lesser degree of commitment than the previous statement. There is no reason to mention the possibility that I could be wrong unless I have a significant doubt, or the conversation leads to an admission of fallibility.<sup>8</sup>

Compare this case to the case in which my interlocutor counters my knowledge claim by telling me the evidence against my brother: that he was seen leaving the scene of the crime, numerous witnesses saw him threaten his father on many occasions, and he was seen spending a large sum of money that he hadn’t had prior to the murder—the same amount of money now missing from his father’s house. I might respond by saying, “Yes, yes, of course I know all that. It’s possible he committed the murder, *but I know he didn’t.*” In this case, the

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<sup>7</sup> For example, if the man had been given all the relevant statistics before the question was asked, or if he were a philosopher.

<sup>8</sup> This account essentially follows the pragmatic account put forward in Trent Doughery and Parick Rysiew, “Fallibilism, Epistemic Possibility, and Concessive Knowledge Attributions.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 78: 123-132. See especially pages 128 and 129.

concessive knowledge assertion does not sound odd, nor am I backing down from my commitment. As a matter of fact, we might understand this assertion to be illustrating how strong a commitment I actually have. Initially I claimed that I knew my brother didn't commit the murder. My friend proceeded to tell me all the strong and compelling evidence against him. I acknowledged this evidence and still continue to maintain that I know my brother didn't commit the murder.

My friend might respond that I am being stubborn or irrational. If I looked on this case objectively, and not from the position as brother of the accused, I would easily come to the truth of the matter. Obviously, there ought to be a point when I concede that the evidence is just overwhelming and give up on my commitment to my brother. However Polanyi would say that there is no explicit procedure for knowing when this point is. I must rely on my personal judgment in the matter. This judgment involves a risk, but it a risk that ought to be responsibly taken. It might be wrong, but it's also possible that it is right. Consider again the evidence against my brother. It is essentially the same evidence given against Dmitri Karamazov in Dostovesky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In point of fact Dmitri is innocent despite the fact that all the damning evidence is true., His brother Alyosha believes him despite the fact that from a more "objective" point of view the evidence against Dmitri is overwhelming.

It might be useful at this point to look at an example of knowledge that is not as emotionally charged. Consider the statement, "I know my scientific theory is true, but it's possible it isn't." This statement could have been given by many scientists throughout history. Dougherty and Rysiew give the example of a scientific paper presenting evidence for the existence of a top quark. The author of the paper admits that the evidence is inconclusive and

that they could be wrong while still asserting that they know there is a top quark.<sup>9</sup> Dougherty and Rysiew believe that such cases are evidence for holding that knowledge is fallible.

Polanyi would agree, but he would probably go farther. It is only by holding to beliefs that are possibly mistaken that further discoveries are possible.

Polanyi holds that scientists commit themselves to theories in the hope that these theories will anticipate “an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications.”<sup>10</sup> When Copernicus held that the Earth revolves around the Sun, and not the Sun around the Earth, he had no conception of the many discoveries and insights that would arise out of this new understanding. Some scientists hold to theories that are against scientific consensus in the hope that these commitments will ultimately be shown to be more true to scientific standards than the currently accepted view.<sup>11</sup> They do this with full knowledge of the fact that they might be wrong, but are willing to risk this in the hope of making a new discovery. Richard Gelwick, in his introduction to Polanyi’s thought, gives an example from Polanyi’s own life. In 1916, Polanyi set forth a theory concerning the absorption of gasses. The theory was rejected by the scientific community at large, including such a luminary as Einstein. At the time there was much counterevidence against it. Still Polanyi maintained that his theory was essentially correct even while admitting that it could be wrong. It only began to be confirmed in 1930 and his theory is still held to be correct today.<sup>12</sup> The CKA “I know my theory of the absorption of gasses is correct, but it’s possible it isn’t,” couples Polanyi’s commitment with the admission of the risks involved. If the risks

<sup>9</sup> Dougherty and Rysiew, 130-131.

<sup>10</sup> *Personal Knowledge*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to make the distinction between the skilled scientist who holds an unpopular scientific opinion on the basis of scientific standards, and the pseudo-scientist who holds an unpopular scientific opinion on the basis of some other standard or lack of scientific skill.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1977), 30-31.

were not great we would not mention them. But when the risks are significant we very well might, and in doing so we admit our own responsibility in knowing.

### **Conclusion**

Polanyi offers an account of knowledge that understands knowledge to be a commitment of the person to an objective reality. Such a commitment is risky since it could be mistaken. Hence Polanyi is a fallibilist. But Polanyi holds that such risk is necessary in order to further knowledge and scientific discovery. If we accept Polanyi's theory, it also offers an adequate account of concessive knowledge attributions. CKAs are true and express fallibilism. They often sound odd in ordinary contexts because they seem to signal to the listener significant doubt or lack of commitment on the part of the utterer. In other contexts they serve to show the strength of the commitment of the knower, or express his fallibility in knowing. Knowing is a risk and only those who are willing to risk knowing are capable of making discoveries and gaining further knowledge.