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SYLLABUS

of

GIFFORD LECTURES

1951

FIRST SERIES OF LECTURES

BY

PROFESSOR MICHAEL POLANYI F.R.S.

University of Manchester

Subject

COMMITMENT

In Quest of a Post-Critical Philosophy

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In Quest of a Post-Critical Philosophy.

Monday, 7th May, 1951, at 8 p.m.

1. The Necessity of Philosophy: (a) Forms of Intelligence.

Wednesday, 9th May, 1951, at 8 p.m.

2. The Necessity of Philosophy: (b) Intellectual Passions.

Friday, 11th May, 1951, at 8 p.m.

3. The Necessity of Philosophy: (c) The validation of Social Lore

Wednesday, 16th May, 1951, at 8 p.m.

4. The Fiduciary Mode.

Friday, 18th May, 1951, at 5 p.m.

5. The Self-destruction of Objectivism.

Monday, 21st May, 1951, at 8 p.m.

6. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy.

Monday, 28th May, 1951, at 8 p.m.

7. Doubting of Explicit Beliefs.

Wednesday, 30th May, 1951, at 8 p.m.

8. Doubting of Implicit Beliefs.

Friday, 1st June, 1951, at 8 p.m.

9. (a) General Doubt. (b) Commitment.

Monday, 4th June, 1951, at 8 p.m.

10. The Personal, the Universal and the Subjective.

## LECTURE 1.

### The Necessity of Philosophy: (a) Forms of Intelligence.

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I believe that today our decisive convictions must be declared by the voice of philosophy.

The positivist critique which would discredit philosophy by classifying all meaningful statements as either analytical or empirical - leaving no room for philosophy since it is neither - is fallacious. It does not hold against a philosophy which claims to be neither analytical nor empirical.

But we shall not rely on this argument. Instead, we shall try to map out the intellectual performances of man in order to discover the place of philosophy. While drawing this map we shall bear this in mind: Though the process of mapping can never appear on the map which we are in the process of drawing, it should be possible to extend the map later so as to include a picture of the mapping itself.

We start by enumerating the inarticulate processes of intelligence, the material for which is provided by the study of learning in animals. We have (a) recognition of sign-event relations (b) of means-ends relations (c) of alternative part-whole relations.

Articulation transposes these three inarticulate processes respectively into three forms of articulate intelligence which are exemplified (a) by natural science (b) technology (c) mathematics.

Articulation - as represented in particular by symbolic denotation - is itself an inarticulate performance, compounded of all three kinds. Articulation is made highly effective by symbolic operations; these can sustain discursive thought.

Lower forms of intelligence which are predominantly innate, are represented by drive-satisfaction and perception.

This completes the survey of object-directed intelligence.

Next we turn to inter-personal intelligence, and again, observe first the inarticulate level. It includes three forms (a) communication (b) practical interaction (c) understanding of persons.

## LECTURE 2.

### The Necessity of Philosophy: (b) Intellectual Passions.

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Emotional conviviality can be studied in animals on an inarticulate level. They show a profound need for companionship, which satisfies a varied emotional life.

Emotion is not the same as the excitation of desire. The latter is essentially object-directed while emotion is self-sustaining (as in play) or inter-personal.

All intellectual performances are impassioned. Emotion has no separate section on the map of intelligence but may be rather represented by the colouring of the various sections, previously defined without regard to emotion.

Animals may be emotionally keyed up by the expectancy of an event or by making themselves ready for action. A more specifically intellectual affection observed in animals is that of puzzlement by a problem and of intellectual pleasure in its solution. These emotions correspond to the three classes of inarticulate object-directed intellectual performances.

Passing to the articulate level we note the passions sustaining the values of natural science. The values of practical ingenuity are passionately cultivated by technology. Mathematics are guided pre-eminently by our appreciation of intellectual beauty, and this links up mathematics with music and decorative art. Articulation in mathematics, music and painting is not always and never wholly denotative, but involves the creation of new things that are interesting in themselves.

The articulation of emotions arising from practical contacts between men is not denotation but the extension of an act by an appropriate utterance. Commands, complaints, appeals, jokes, sneers, threats, etc., are spoken forms of practical intercourse between men. ('Practical exchanges').

Articulate communication is ultimately based on inarticulate communication. (See Lecture 1).

Communication concerning persons presupposes emotional identification both between the persons communicating with each other, and between these and the persons about whom they are talking.

Articulate communications referring to objects, articulate practical exchanges and articulate communications referring to persons are each embodied in an important department of Social Lore (see Lecture 3).

While this survey has already touched by implication on a great many philosophic problems, the necessity of paying attention to them systematically has not yet been made apparent.

### LECTURE 3.

#### The Necessity of Philosophy: (c) The Validation of Social Lore.

The common acceptance of an idiom by a group which transmits its usage from generation to generation produces complex systems of articulation which we shall call Social Lore.

(1) Cognitive Lore forms a class of articulations which are not about persons as persons. They include science and technology which are pre-eminently object-directed systems, and also mathematics, music, painting, which are largely object-producing rather than object-indicating. Organised processes for revising and amplifying cognitive lore are established in every society.

(2) Practical Lore comprises all articulate convivial exchanges, like the process of government, and the enforcement of other mores in society.

(3) Inter-personal Interpretation is embodied in history, the drama, the epos, the novel. Political oratory and journalism may be added. These are interpretations of man in the tradition of humanism.

The inarticulate process by which the elements of speech are taught to succeeding generations largely determines the scope and significance of all its articulately formulated lore. Informal tradition is the vehicle of lore and is itself transmitted by it.

Social lore cannot exist except within a group of adherents; the concensus of these is maintained by their persuasive passions.

A feat of intelligence cannot be adequately characterised by description, for the mere description of an act cannot tell whether it is intelligent or not. This shortcoming of the descriptive method becomes more accentuated in respect to the higher manifestations of intelligence, such as social lore. When we speak of science we confirm the validity of science, while when speaking of magic we do not confirm the validity of magic; indeed we ought to speak of 'magic' instead. Marxists speak of 'law' and 'democracy' in the West and imply that these are pretences.

Social lore cannot be referred to unambiguously without underwriting or denying its claims to validity. This raises questions - which we cannot ignore - as to our justification for accepting or rejecting the claim to validity of any social lore. We are thus faced with inescapable problems of a philosophic character.

## LECTURE 4.

### The Fiduciary Mode.

In order to represent the position of philosophy we envisage a hierarchy of logical levels. Object directed acts of intelligence are represented on Level One with a Level Zero below them furnished with the objects to which intelligence refers. Intelligence which produces its own objects and inter-personal intelligence cannot be divided into two levels: it is all on Level One.

All critical and analytical investigations about actions on Level One are assigned to Level Two.

Philosophy which undertakes to justify in general terms the acts performed on Level One is on a higher level than One, but its localisation is otherwise indeterminate since its own reconsideration may shift it indefinitely to higher levels. This leaves us with a problem.

Three limitations are imposed on the philosopher (1) he can do nothing but talk. (2) he can only use declaratory sentences. (3) he must speak impersonally with a claim to universal validity.

These terms place philosophy under the obligation of conforming to the supposed characteristics of science.

This demand is unreasonable for science itself does not conform to these terms. An attempt to examine the justification of impersonal statements of fact in terms of impersonal statements of fact leads to an infinite regress. As a first step towards avoiding this regress I shall re-cast declaratory statements into a form which makes it apparent that they are personal allegations. (Fiduciary Mode). This brings them into line with other personal actions and should eventually lead to a justification of declaratory statements within a general framework of personal commitments. (Lecture 6, 9 and 10).

## LECTURE 5.

### The Self-destruction of Objectivism.

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The reduction in principle of all objectively established knowledge to the status of personal convictions would break with the traditional purpose of critical philosophy which is to discriminate between the two and to reject the latter as merely subjective. The history of philosophy suggests that such a break is imminent.

St. Augustine's division between supernatural and natural knowledge exalted faith in revelation as the path to salvation and taught that natural science was instructive only insofar as it reflected divine illumination; belief was in general logically anterior to knowledge.

This view prevailed substantially in Europe until the emancipation of critical thought from ecclesiastic authority. After that the position of faith and reason (or science) became gradually inverted. Through the intermediation of Descartes' rationalism and Locke's empiricism the process was completed in Hume's scepticism. But at the same time the critical process destroyed its own standards by reducing all knowledge to the status of subjectivity.

To protect objective knowledge against scepticism Kant tried to postulate some of its foundations a priori while he accorded to others the ambiguous position of 'regulative principles'.

Non-Euclidean geometry eroded the a priori categories of Kant and subsequently the critique of science was pursued partly by the further elaboration of 'regulative principles' and partly by a scientifically objective observation of science.

Theoretically, the latter process involves an infinite regress; in practice it leads to a denial of the rational status of science. The attempts to base science on 'regulative principles' has resulted in a series of formulations which - when stripped of their ambiguity - increasingly reveal the fiduciary nature of science. Thus objectivism approaches destruction by itself.

## LECTURE 6.

### Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy.

Philosophy cannot perform its task within the restrictions of objectivism. These were breached in the first place in Lecture 4 by recasting for the purpose of accuracy all declaratory sentences in a fiduciary mode which links them to a speaker or writer. I shall now venture a step further towards a post-critical philosophy.

I propose to break altogether with objectivism by making it my purpose to find and declare what I truly believe in. The vocabulary used previously in Lecture 1-3 has already been chosen with this in mind. It implied from the start the beliefs which I shall eventually declare.

Objectivity retains its status within our several accepted frameworks of demonstration; it applies to fragmentary issues.

The dangers of a frankly fiduciary philosophy cannot be avoided. Philosophy cannot be reduced to linguistic criticism since this has no power to declare our beliefs. The recasting in objectivist terms of ethics, law and political theory does not eliminate from them our underlying convictions but merely dresses them up in ambiguous scientific terms, which is confusing and degrading.

The rehabilitation of overt belief, if it can be achieved, may restore the balance between observation and moral judgment in our approach to human affairs. It should enable us to envisage without self contradiction the social rootedness and social responsibility of our beliefs concerning man and society.

Fiduciarism must guard against depriving itself of any claim to objective validity; it must learn to express belief in a way which will countenance beliefs as beliefs without reducing their content or the act of affirming them to the status of mere subjectivity. This leaves us with a problem, to be taken up again in Lectures 9 & 10.

: The syllabi of Lectures 7-10 will be distributed later.

## LECTURE 7.

### The Doubting of Explicit Beliefs.

The critical endeavour of the modern mind draws a sharp distinction between belief and doubt. It attacks belief by pitting against it the method of doubt, in the expectation that this will leave behind a residue of true knowledge.

The logical weakness of this principle may seem transparent, but it remains so deeply ingrained in the modern mind that I shall not feel assured in advocating deliberate belief unless I have first fully faced the claims of this principle.

We may distinguish (1) contradictory and (2) agnostic doubt. The first is a belief in the contradiction of a belief; which is obviously as much a belief as that which it calls in question. Agnostic doubt consists of two parts, the first of which expresses disbelief in the provenness or in the provability of a belief. Unless the belief in question lies quite outside our interest, we invariably exercise a presumption in respect to the credibility of beliefs that are believed to be not demonstrated or not demonstrable. Scientific discovery is wholly based on the acceptance of unproven beliefs. Courts of law possess a whole system of presumptions laid down for the purpose of definitely deciding unproven questions.

There exists no field of intellectual activity in which the principle of doubt can be said to be operating and producing acceptable results.

In fact its supposed distinctive status seems to be wholly derived from a historic accident. The modern rise of belief in reason and science occurred in opposition to the authority of the Christian Churches and so this new belief was called 'doubt' in contrast to belief in religion.

## LECTURE 8.

### The Doubting of Implicit Beliefs.

Our most deeply ingrained convictions are never stated in the form of articulate affirmations, but are embedded in the conceptual framework in which we apprehend or deem to apprehend the things on the existence of which we rely.

A system of implicit beliefs is exemplified by Zande beliefs in the efficacy of the poison oracle. Their stability in face of adverse evidence is seen to rest on three interrelated principles (1) circularity (2) epicyclical explanatory reserves (3) suppressed nucleation of alternative conceptions. These principles are operative also in upholding the stability of the naturalistic interpretation of things embodied in science.

Scientific progress always entails some measure of readjustment and often a far-reaching revision of the existing framework of scientific conceptions. While new facts are assimilated to this framework, it itself undergoes adaptation to them. Both processes are equally powerful instruments of discovery. Caution is a virtue in scientific research (as it is in other arts, though it may bear a different name in these) but boldness is just as important. No principle of doubt could guide the scientist to distinguish between sterile timidity and wise caution.

A deductive system represents a framework of implicit beliefs, stabilised by circularity. Any attempt to express its acceptance by the explicit affirmation of one part of it (its axioms, etc.) is misleading.

Yet no conceptual framework is ever completely stable, for any articulation is by its very nature inadequate and our urge to make it more consistent, precise and apposite remains ever unsatisfied. But the process of doubting and revising the implication of any existing language goes on within the very language which is being reformed by doubt. In the transition from one idiom to another we are never left without any idiom.

The doubting of implicit beliefs involves therefore - just as the doubting of explicit beliefs - no reduction in the volume of beliefs, but is an acceptance of new beliefs in place of those previously held.

## LECTURE 9.

### (a) General Doubt.

If the reconsideration of any single belief is undertaken in the assumption of an overwhelming background of unquestioned beliefs, then doubt cannot be simultaneously applied to all our beliefs. In this sense an allegation of doubt in respect to all our beliefs is logical nonsense.

Yet there is a meaning of universal doubt which is free from self-contradiction. We might conceivably abandon a whole system of beliefs, like mathematics, and this kind of doubt might be extended until we have relinquished all means of articulation. This would entail the extinction of all discursive thought.

The example of children reared among animals shows that in the absence of indoctrination by human intercourse, children do not invent new concepts of their own, but remain arrested in their mental development at the level of imbecility. Yet even such dumb creatures would form perceptions involving false assumptions, such as that of absolute motion. They would, moreover, be swayed by blind terror and rage.

Ever since Locke, great hopes were set by numerous writers on philosophic doubt as an antidote to credulity and fanaticism; but what the advocates of doubt really hoped for was the universal acceptance of their own beliefs.

### (b) Commitment.

Though the philosopher must know that he is only expressing his own beliefs and claims his right to do this, he does not wish to talk of himself but of the things he believes in.

A sense in which this is possible should become accessible by forming the somewhat novel concept of 'commitment'. This effects a necessary union of the 'personal' and the 'impersonal' and avoids the dilemma of the 'subjective' and the 'universal'; all these terms being re-interpreted within the framework of commitment.

All acts of intelligence listed in Lectures 1-3 are those of a person pervaded by passion. They are commitments. In contrast, we know of pain, tiredness, boredom as conditions that are merely endured. These also are pervasive affections but are not commitments; they affect only the subjective in us, not the personal.

The paradigm of commitment is the recognition of a problem and the persistent effort to find a solution for it. Creative originality achieves here an aim of impersonal validity. The universal may be said to constitute the terms in which the discoverer conceives his responsibility in pursuing his quest for discovery. The universal can be approached only within the commitment situation.

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The Personal, the Universal and the Subjective.

The personal and the universal mutually require each other within the commitment situation; seen from outside it the personal is reduced to subjectivity, while the universal becomes an incomplete term lacking true meaning.

The two poles of commitment, the personal and the universal, arise from the early autistic state of the infant mind by its polarisation along the dimensions of self — non-self. This makes possible conscious commitments as responsible actions to which we feel irresistibly compelled.

All commitment (when reflected upon) appears as a gamble with indefinite stakes for indeterminate prizes. The full import of the convictions to which we commit ourselves necessarily passes our understanding. Commitment has the force of personal belief precisely to the extent to which it is (in this sense) ultra vires. Inductive inference is the classic example for the necessity of commitment on what must appear on reflection to be insufficient grounds.

'Transfer' brings to light a range of indeterminate implications that are hidden in our present convictions. Common Law constitutes a system of consecutive 'transfers'. Codes of Law must also admit to entail an indefinite range of unpredictable consequences in respect to unforeseeable circumstances.

Complete formalisation would eliminate commitment; but it is impossible to achieve this.

Our most fundamental commitment is performed on the instinctive level, when we learn to use the idiom of the community in which we are brought up. The beliefs thus acquired are logically anterior to all our subsequently formed convictions. I accept this accidental starting point as my calling, which specifies the limit beyond which it is impossible to hold myself responsible.

The commitment of the body is life itself. Its needs present problems which are solved by our bodily functions in universally valid terms.

In aiming at the universal we attempt the impossible; but I believe to be under obligation to do this and that I may trust in the result, so long as I remain aware of my position within my commitment. This awareness should also serve as a guide towards resolving the logical difficulties raised before (particularly in Lectures 1, 4 and 6) of harmonising the contents of philosophic reflections with the act of their affirmation.