

TACIT KNOWING--BETWEEN MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM: A PROBLEM OF COHERENCE

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I

In this paper I address myself to two issues concerning Polanyi's epistemology. The first is that notwithstanding his critique of objectivism and his post-critical perspective, Polanyi remains firmly rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment. To put this somewhat differently, I think that although he may be regarded as an early postmodernist, he may be seen also as someone who tried to do a job of restoration, namely drawing attention to essential elements in the heritage of the Enlightenment, elements he thought were in danger of being forgotten and threatened. Obviously, this a very large issue and therefore I shall confine myself strictly to the epistemological issues involved.

The first point quite naturally leads to a second, namely that Polanyi's being both a modernist and a postmodernist has everything to do with a certain tension in his position. I shall point out briefly that one of the more serious problems in this connection is the overall coherence of his epistemology. This second issue, it seems to me, is the more difficult and interesting and I shall therefore concentrate on it. In the last part of my paper I shall also make a few suggestions for a possible solution.

II

In order to see in what respects Polanyi's epistemology may be called "modern" or "postmodern," let me start by giving useful working definitions of these vague terms. Using some ideas recently developed by the theologians Murphy and McClendon, I suggest we characterize "modern thought" or modernism quite generally as comprising at least three doctrines of knowledge, language and reality respectively.¹ These doctrines are:

- (1) epistemological *foundationalism*,
- (2) the (either) *representational* (or) *expressivist* theory of language,
- (3) *reductionism*.

Obviously, modernism comprises more than this. For instance, it also incorporates ideals like the autonomy of the individual, tolerance and emancipation through reason and science. However, keeping as closely as possible to my epistemological interests, this minimal definition is useful enough for our present purposes. A few words on the three modernist doctrines.

(1) Murphy and McClendon identify epistemological foundationalism with the view that knowledge can be justified only by finding indubitable, incorrigible and therefore “foundational” beliefs upon which it is constructed. Though this is certainly correct as a general characterization, further important aspects should be pointed out. As I take it, foundationalism can also be defined as the epistemological position which adheres to the age-old definition of knowledge (with a capital “K”) or *episteme* as justified true belief. It may also be identified with the equally old quest for certainty and the accompanying attempt to solve the problem of skepticism. Foundationalists are extremely concerned with the problem of whether, and if so how, beliefs, statements or theories can be justified. If they justify their beliefs by an appeal to a set of particular “fundamental” or *basic* beliefs which are allegedly incorrigible, self-evident to the senses or beyond any conceivable doubt, I suggest we call them *dogmatic* justificationists.

(2) The representational-expressivist theory of language is the view that the primary function of language is representing the objects or facts to which it refers. In all other cases language merely expresses psychological states or attitudes of the speaker. Clearly, on this view all ethical discourse is non-factual and non-referring and therefore at most expressive, or, as logical positivists (cf. C.L. Stevenson) said, emotive.

(3) According to Murphy and McClendon, reductionism is part of modernism as the attempt to understand reality by reducing it to its component parts. In ethics and political philosophy we have a parallel in the sense that in Enlightened modernism the individual is almost always considered to be more important than the whole, so that the individual has priority over the community (Hegel and some of his followers are probably the exceptions here). Can we find traces of these modernist doctrines in the theory of personal knowing? Starting with reductionism, it is quite clear that the answer should be “No.” Not only is Polanyi’s epistemology explicitly anti-reductionist, it is also quite clear that it is thoroughly holistic. And holism, as we shall see in a moment, is precisely a mark of postmodernism.

Not only do we not find any reductionism in Polanyi’s work, we do not find any trace of the representational-expressivist view of language in it either. This is not to say that in his view language is not in the referring or expressing line of business. Rather, Polanyi tries to integrate both functions in his theory of the personal or tacit component, according to which all assertions of fact express beliefs (or judgements) and are “essentially accompanied by feelings of intellectual satisfaction or of a persuasive desire and a sense of personal responsibility.”² As I have shown elsewhere, this doctrine of the tacit component of assertions is in significant respects quite congenial with Searle’s theory of speech acts.³ So there is no modernism here either.

This leaves us with the question of epistemological foundationalism and it seems to me that we cannot answer this in the negative. For it is quite clear that Polanyi takes the modernist problem of justification of belief and the defence against skepticism very seriously. Part III of *Personal Knowledge* is largely devoted to this issue, as the fiduciary programme, including the “Critique of Doubt,” the doctrine of commitment and Polanyi’s explicit invitation to dogmatism, are clearly meant to solve the problem of skepticism.

The conclusion that there is a strong element of modernism in Polanyi's position can be strengthened further by pointing out further modern, perhaps even premodern, ideas to which he quite clearly adheres. These are:

(a) The ideal of truth as a regulative standard to which we ought to submit ourselves and as something we ought to search for, even though we shall never find it.

(b) Strong, almost naïve scientific realism.

(c) Openly professed commitment to (natural) science as by far the most reliable guide to knowledge and truth.

(d) The thesis of a correspondence (of some sorts) between the structure of tacit knowing and the structure of the comprehensive entity which is its object.⁴

Obviously, (a) - (d) are important and interesting elements of Polanyi's philosophy. Since I cannot go into them, suffice it to say that they are not postmodernist. Before turning to our main concern, the issue of justificationism and in particular Polanyi's invitation to dogmatism, let us see briefly where he stands in respect to postmodernism.

III

Murphy and McClendon characterize postmodernism in contrast to the three modernist doctrines.

(1) *Epistemological holism*.

Quine is taken as an early postmodern epistemologist who explicitly rejected the foundationalist model and replaced it with a holist account. Human knowledge is not taken in isolation, either as theories or as particular knowledge claims, but rather as a whole. By considering theories in conjunction with the relevant background knowledge, epistemological holism renders the status of the well-known requirements of falsifiability and verifiability problematic. For instance, according to the so-called Duhem-Quine thesis,

any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system ... Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune from revision.⁵

As I shall indicate below, Polanyi can be interpreted consistently as an adherent of this thesis.

(2) The attempt to analyse meaning solely in terms of its referential force is abandoned. The obvious examples in this connection are the later Wittgenstein and the speech act theorists.

(3) In postmodern ethics, as defended by Alasdair MacIntyre, emotivism is avoided by recovering a corporate or organic view of society that will support the notion of a common good.

It is easy to find these and other postmodern elements in Polanyi's epistemology and for this reason Murphy and McClendon may well have taken it as a paradigm example of early postmodernism. I point out the following in

particular.

(i) Polanyi's epistemology is thoroughly holistic. Support for this comes from the fact that he nowhere pays attention to statements, beliefs or theories in isolation, but always in context and as parts of a larger network or framework of beliefs and always embedded in a background of tacit notions, stances and practices. Typically holistic is also Polanyi's employment of notions like 'superior knowledge' (the sum total of the knowledge and values embedded in a culture's tradition), "conceptual framework" (by means of which and through which we make sense of the world and which is objectively given in the languages of a culture) and "system of belief."

(ii) A further important characteristic of postmodern epistemology, not mentioned by Murphy and McClelland, is its being "naturalized." This notion also stems from Quine, who argued that whereas the natural sciences are seen traditionally as contained in epistemology, epistemology may now be taken as a component part of psychology.⁶ Clearly, Quine's idea of a reciprocal containment of epistemology in psychology and *vice versa* contradicts the common modernist thesis of the strict separation of matters of logic (Kant's *quaestiones de iure*, Leibniz's *veriteés de raison*) and of matters of psychological (sociological, historical) fact. However, it is also obvious that Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing is meant to dissolve this exclusive disjunction and that he often employs scientific ideas and facts for illustrating, and even demonstrating particular theses within that theory.

(iii) As regards his view of language, there can be no doubt that Polanyi is emphasizing its communal nature. In view of the fact that he has often been interpreted as a subjectivist and a solipsist, it should be noted that in Polanyi's view the search for knowledge and truth is a communal affair also.

(iv) In my view a further postmodern element is the fiduciary or fideist thesis that conceptual frameworks and cultural practices have their own internal standards of rationality and excellence, though not, if I read Polanyi correctly at all, of truth.

There may well be other elements but (i) - (iv) clearly establish Polanyi as a postmodern philosopher of knowledge (and possibly also as a postmodern moral philosopher). However, the combination of the postmodern fiduciary thesis (iv), the explicit invitation to dogmatism and his typical modernist preoccupation with the problem of justifying our commitment to science as a central part of our 'superior knowledge' leads to a suspicion of incoherence, or at least strain within Polanyi's epistemology. This brings me to the second part of my paper in which I shall be concerned with the question whether or not Polanyi's position is incoherent in being both relativistic and dogmatic at the same time.

IV

Let us start with the postmodernist thesis (iv). It seems that it leads to *relativism* as soon as we pose the question of how we can give a reasons for our commitment to science (or any other cultural system). Part of Polanyi's solution to this problem consists of a sociological description or, if you prefer, a philosophical assessment of an important aspect of our modern cultural predicament. Underlying science is a naturalistic conception of the universe which forms part of modern man's mental life. Therefore, whether we like it or not, science itself is part of our mental life.

A more interesting part of his solution, however, is the postmodern principle which Polanyi introduces for assessing cultural belief systems, namely that “any sincere account of the reasons for which we . . . share in the mental life [offered by a cultural system] must necessarily be given as part of that life.”⁷

We are reminded here again of ideas of the later Wittgenstein who on a rather common interpretation held that language games and forms of life can only be accounted for in terms of standards and criteria which are internal to them.

It seems to me that Polanyi’s internalist principle suggests perceptual and conceptual relativism. It may even be interpreted as an early version of a thesis of the so-called “Strong Programme” in the sociology of knowledge, namely that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality.⁸ On the other hand, Polanyi’s relativism is not as radical, for it is obvious that he is neither a relativist about truth nor a moral relativist.⁹

Whereas the postmodernist elements appear to lead to relativism, Polanyi’s modernist ideas seem to convey a strong whiff of foundationalism, particularly in the case of his explicit invitation to dogmatism. Clearly, our question now becomes how to account for the fact that Polanyi is both a relativist and a dogmatist.

In order to understand Polanyi’s invitation to dogmatism, we had best turn to Polanyi’s cherished example of a cultural system, science. There is a well known passage in *Personal Knowledge*, where he addresses himself to the question as to why we should believe in science and not in say, witchcraft, Zande magic, fundamentalism or communism. In other words, the question appears to be whether, and if so how, our fiduciary commitment to (natural) science can be justified now that proof and foundations have turned out to be impossible.

Polanyi took this problem very seriously. In fact, he tells us that the whole of *Personal Knowledge* “is but a quest for a substantial reply to a question of this kind.”¹⁰

He wants to ‘stabilize belief in science against skepticism’ and this leads us to the well-known passage in *Personal Knowledge* where Polanyi explicitly invites us to adopt “dogmatism.”

This invitation is meant “to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs.”¹¹ How should we take this? It certainly seems to come quite close to subjectivism or dogmatic justificationism, and it should come as no surprise that some have interpreted Polanyi as representing precisely a kind of dogmatic subjectivism.¹² Again, the tension is real. How are such matters to be reconciled?

V

A solution to the problem of the coherence of Polanyi’s overall position, I suggest, consists at least of two steps. The first is concerned with the proper interpretation of Polanyi’s dogmatism, the second with his fallibilism--the doctrine that we always might be mistaken in what we sincerely believe to be true.

By “dogmatism” I understand the doctrine according to which there are at least some propositions or things which we cannot fail to believe, and which are such that it follows from our believing them that they are true. Descartes would be the paradigm example of a dogmatist in this sense. It is also a central thesis of what we earlier called dogmatic justificationism, characterized by a desperate interest in the quest for certainty and secure foundations in solving the

problem of skepticism.

There is, however, another kind of dogmatism which is not concerned with foundations but with methodology.¹³ This *methodological* dogmatism is better known as the principle of tenacity which prescribes that one should stick to one's theories or beliefs as long as it is reasonably possible. Obviously, the point of this rule is to put a constraint on the attitudes of scientists and other explorers: it says that we should not give up our beliefs and theories in the face of adverse evidence too soon. For, as already C.S. Peirce (and in his footsteps Popper and others) pointed out, if we did, we would deprive ourselves of the opportunity to find out their strength.¹⁴

As I have argued elsewhere more extensively, the best interpretation of Polanyi is to say that he advocates methodological, not justificatory dogmatism.¹⁵ My reasons for this rest mainly on a number of statements which are admittedly rather isolated, but leave no doubt as to their fallibilist import. I refer to such Polanyian statements as, for instance, “every factual assertion is conceivably mistaken” and thus also “conceivably corrigible,” “the possibility of error is a necessary element of any belief bearing on reality,” “all fundamental beliefs are irrefutable as well as unprovable” and the emergent Noosphere, and thus all our allegedly superior knowledge “comprises everything in which we may be totally mistaken.”¹⁶

Thus the balance can be restored: good reasons can be given for the thesis that no real incoherence is involved, provided that we may interpret Polanyi's dogmatism as methodological and provided that we may also take him as a fallibilist. We may then see Polanyi as a traditionalist who maintains that now that proof and foundations have turned out to be impossible and a God's eye point of view is unattainable, we should rely on our cultural systems and traditions as the only starting point for our inquiries available to us. This is also the dialectical process of learning and discovery, of dwelling in a framework as a condition for breaking out of it. And pace Professor Torrance, this is a further reason why I do not believe that Polanyi intended to break away from the Enlightenment.

NOTES

1. N. Murphy & J.W. McClendon, Jr., “Distinguishing Modern and Post modern Theologies,” *Modern Theology* 5 (1989), 191-214.

2. *Personal Knowledge*, 27.

3. Cf. A.F. Sanders, *Michael Polanyi's Post-Critical Epistemology: A Reconstruction of Some Aspects of "Tacit Knowing,"* Amsterdam 1988, Ch. 2.

4. Cf. *The Tacit Dimension*, 33f.

5. Cf. W.V.O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1961), in *From a Logical Point of View*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963, 43.

6. Cf. W.V.O. Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized” (1965) in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia University Press, New York/London 1969, 83. See also p. 87 where Polanyi, Kuhn and Hanson are depicted as tending towards epistemological nihilism which, according to Quine, resulted from the dislodging of epistemology from its old status as first philosophy.

7. Cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 171.

8. Cf. B. Barnes & D. Bloor, “Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge,” in *Rationality and Relativism*, M. Hollis and S. Lukes, Eds., Oxford: Blackwell, 1982, 27.

9. As regards truth, the statement, “through every person may believe something different to be true, there is only one truth” (cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 315) hardly leaves room for doubt.

10. *Personal Knowledge*, 150.

11. Cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 268.

12. Cf. for example, A. E. Musgrave, *Impersonal Knowledge: A Criticism of Subjectivism in Epistemology*, Ph.D. University of London, 1969, which may be regarded as the canonical expression of critical rationalist criticism of Polanyi.

13. Cf. S. Haack, “Fallibilism and Necessity,” *Synthese*, 41, (1979), 52. See also her “Epistemology With a Knowing Subject,” *Review of Metaphysics*, 33 (1979), 309-35.

14. Cf. K. R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations. The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, London, 1963, 312; also, *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach*, Oxford 1972, 30.

15. Cf. Andy F. Sanders, *ibid*, Ch. 6, 183-226.

16. Cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 314f., 271, 404.