

# Michael Polanyi: Tacit Knowledge and Articulation, Part I

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by [Pedro Blas González](#) (August 2024)



I filosofi (Ottone Rosai, 1920)

**Michael Polanyi (1891-1976)** was a rare twentieth-century thinker.



Michael Polanyi (Lucia Moholy, 1936)

Besides being a polymath, the Hungarian philosopher was also an *uomo universale*. Polanyi embraced a form of intellectual curiosity that is non-existent in contemporary, postmodern academic circles. The scope and breath of Polanyi's thought was intellectually honest, awe-inspiring, life-affirming and constructive. The prescient quality of Polanyi's thought is worthy of serious study, given its ease in demonstrating the unity of a vast array of human knowledge. It is uncommon to encounter a twentieth-century thinker who can match the thread that Michael Polanyi weaves through philosophical, scientific and religious thought.

Polanyi's thought is exemplary for its penetrating understanding of the history of ideas. Intellectual history is an area that the majority of twentieth-century philosophers have all but neglected. Instead, most twentieth-century thinkers opted for the security and less demanding work of specialization. Their neglect of interdisciplinary questions makes the vast catalogue of twentieth-century philosophy one-dimensional and sterile. With the passage of time, this disregard for the nexus of ideas and its significance to vital life has made a great deal of contemporary philosophy passé,

forgettable, and ultimately, regrettable.

Against the demons of overt specialization, Polanyi's thought demonstrates a profound and original grasp of the fundamental role that metaphysics plays in science and religious faith. This is what has traditionally been thought of as the perennial philosophy. Polanyi's visionary ability in realizing the importance of offering a unified intellectual account of man demonstrates his overarching genius. His thought pays homage to the systematic thought of past philosophers. This is particularly important in light of the dysfunctional fragmentation that philosophy, as an academic discipline, began to undergo in the second half of the twentieth century.

Analytic thinkers have incessantly tinkered with philosophical thought, in what can be described as a hybrid form of academic scholasticism. This kind of scholasticism bears little resemblance to metaphysical and existential human concerns—the meat and potatoes of philosophical reflection.

On the other hand, postmodern, deconstruction Marxist 'theorists' have pulverized the relevance of philosophy for a thoughtful and culturally literate reading public. This academic camp has made philosophy the whore of make-work, radical social/political ideology. In sharp contrast to these two dominant intellectual aberrations, Polanyi's epistemology remains grounded in common sense and intuition. For Polanyi, knowledge is uninterested and requires enormous sacrifice by individuals to ascertain. He explains:

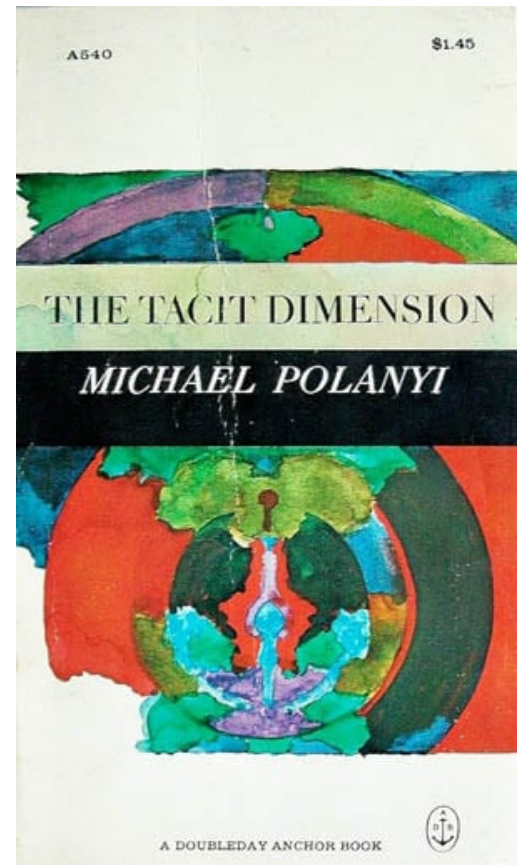
*These things, noble actions, works of art or science, serve no material need, but demand, on the contrary, material sacrifice: they are deemed excellent in themselves. And it is because man is capable of such sacrifice that he himself demands to be respected, and will be respected by those who share his respect among men. And this is also the*

*framework, therefore, within which man writing history confronts the men who made history.*

I will elaborate on three aspects of Polanyi's thought: Tacit knowledge, the articulation of human knowledge, and the implication of the aforementioned to human liberty and economics as staple forms of being human.

## **The Significance of Tacit Knowledge**

Michael Polanyi argues that "we can know more than we can tell." This is a central tenet of human knowledge. This serves as the entry level experience of young thinkers—this is also commensurate with the thought process of young children—upon first discovering human reality, via their unpolished effort as free thinkers. Polanyi's assertion that tacit knowledge is the basic form of human knowledge makes prodigious sense. By all practical considerations, tacit knowledge remains outside the domain of quantification.



If knowledge is possible, this is because a knower, that is, an individual thinker has actively uncovered an aspect of human reality—a technē, let us say—of thought as a tool that is employed to uncover specific areas of knowledge. 'Active' is the operative word that best describes man's search for truth. We must consider how technical knowledge affects the question of human knowledge as a whole. Technical knowledge –

know-how – is a liberating discovery for human potential to understand human nature and objective reality.

A chapter in Polanyi's book *Tacit Knowledge* is appropriately titled "A Society of Explorers." While technical knowledge does not concern itself in addressing questions of 'why,' but rather 'how,' young thinkers eventually learn that objective knowledge is not only possible, but also an indispensable aspect of human well-being that can ultimately lead to happiness, if not contentment.

In addition, if knowledge is possible, that promising human potential points to the fact that actual knowing 'this' or 'that' must necessarily come as a result of engaging the human potential for knowledge. Tacit knowledge is two-fold: It is the recognition that individuals possess knowledge that is pre-articulate—that one must manifest outwardly—in a verifiable and objective manner, if we are to be considered knowledgeable. The second condition that tacit knowledge must meet is the realization that human potential for knowledge—the capacity for logical inference—let us say, is a form of knowledge in itself.

The former form of knowledge allows man to gather knowledge about objective reality that can be transferred to other receptive human beings. This type of cognition allows for the realization that knowledge is objective, and, as Plato argues, also eternal given that it appropriates the essential structure of permanent things. For instance, Polanyi recognizes the importance of identifying objective knowledge as the necessary ground of science and epistemological certainty. However, this does not preclude the fact that it is differentiated human beings—individuals—who must undertake the pursuit of knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge requires intellectual honesty, awe and wonder, and good will, in addition to personal sacrifice.

Polanyi poses the question: How can knowledge be both personal

and objective? This is a concern hailed by many thinkers. For instance, Plato views truth (*alētheia*) as the underlying superstructure of human reality that must be sought after for man to break through to objective knowledge.

Alētheia demands that thinkers be active participants in the pursuit of knowledge. This means that the latent level of reality that alētheia brings forth will not reveal itself in the absence of willing and active knowers who desire to know. Truth can only be embraced through an active intellectual process, instead of embracing passive and often damaging opinions (*dóxa*). This is the strain of opinion and truth that one encounters in Parmenides. More recently, the Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), argued that just because man embraces truth from a finite perspective does not mean that truth is relative. Ortega argues that we are always inching forward in understanding the nature of objective reality. Polanyi asserts: "I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill."

It goes without saying that thinkers who seek truth as the objective operant principle of the universe—and human existence on metaphysical and existential terms—must remain humble in this pursuit. Why is that important?

Consider the psychological and moral dynamics of honest thinkers who confront the possibility that, in their search for objective truth, they can fall into error. The possibility of logical error is a fundamental condition of objectivity that intellectually honest thinkers must contend with. This is an admission that when I am wrong the problem lies in my faulty logical inference, not with the structure of truth and objectivity. This is what Polanyi argues regarding the importance of objectivity in science. Ironically, error is never encountered in relativism, for relativists do not recognize right and wrong. The possibility of logical error acts as a form of reconciliation of truth and self-reflection;



an essential moral characteristic of sincere seekers of truth. This is what Socrates called the élenchos, the spirit of philosophy proper.

An additional irony of tacit knowledge is that it cannot be properly understood at the start of an inquiry into the nature of knowledge, only as its outcome. Polanyi argues that comprehension is neither an arbitrary act or passive experience. Yet the human capacity for understanding does yield objective knowledge. Polanyi posits tacit knowledge as the essential aspect of human intelligence, which counters the nihilism that postmodern thinkers sell to unsuspecting people. Tacit knowledge is not so much a measure of knowledge, as it is a recognition of what Polanyi refers to as man's capacity for conceptual development. He explains:

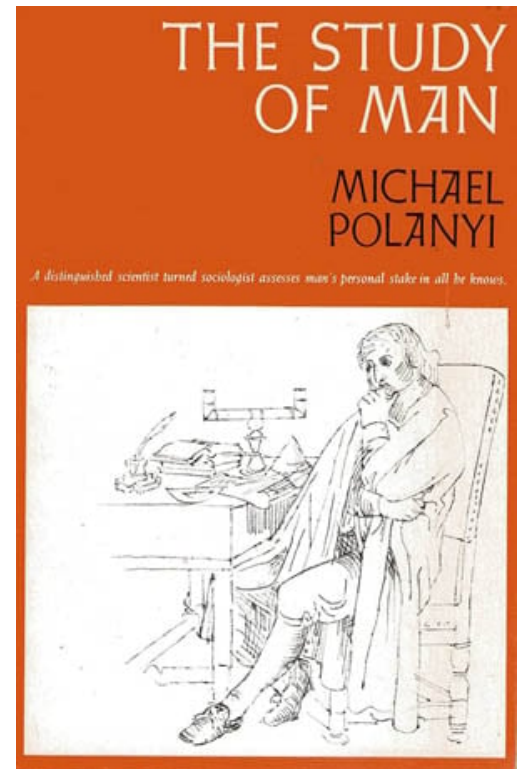
*But can it be argued, once more, that the possibility of teaching these appearances by practical exercises proves that we can tell our knowledge of them? The answer is that we can do so only by relying on the pupil's intelligent co-operation for catching the meaning of the demonstration. Indeed, any definition of a word denoting an external thing must ultimately rely on pointing at such a thing. This naming-cum-pointing is called "an ostensive definition," and this philosophic expression conceals a gap to be bridged by an intelligent effort on the part of the person to whom we want to tell what the word means. Our message had left something behind that we could not tell, and its reception must rely on it that the person addressed will discover that which we have not been able to communicate.*

The tacit dimension of human knowledge, as Polanyi refers to this, is concerned with integrating knowledge with other aspects of the human person. It is for this reason that tacit

knowledge serves as the ground of human understanding and all forms of articulate or pre-articulate wisdom.

## Articulation and Execution of Knowledge

Polanyi presents knowledge as possibility, as a potential of the human person. Knowledge is rooted in such structures as language, pre-linguistic tacit understanding and man's inarticulate faculties. Regardless of the form or stage of development, knowledge informs the moral capacity of the human person. For Polanyi, knowledge cannot be conceived in isolation. He eschews all attempts to reduce philosophic and scientific knowledge to their respective component parts.



What is the relationship between articulate and inarticulate knowledge in Polanyi's thought? One practical way to address this question is to distinguish what we know from what we can say about it. The former pertains to the tacit dimension, while the latter is our attempt to communicate knowledge. The area of agreement between these two poles culminates in a synthesis, what Polanyi refers to as articulation. Articulation must keep tacit knowledge as its point of reference. This is the role of articulation. Polanyi stresses that the articulation of tacit knowledge not be allowed to deteriorate into a mode of expression that strives for self-conscious recognition.

A fundamental characteristic of tacit knowledge is that this form of knowledge exceeds our power of articulation. It is difficult to imagine a dog chasing its tail, if the tail is



positioned at the front of the animal. This same understanding can be conveyed in terms of tacit knowledge. In Polanyi's epistemology, articulation is not the main event, rather the vehicle that delivers us to meaning. He explains:

*While I read the letter, I was consciously aware both of its text and of the meaning of the text, but my awareness of the text, but my awareness of the text was merely instrumental to that of the meaning, so that the text was transparent in respect to its meaning. After putting the letter down, I lost my conscious awareness of the text, but remained subsidiary aware of it in terms of my inarticulate knowledge of its content. Tacit knowledge is manifestly present, therefore, not only when it exceeds the powers of articulation, but even when it exactly coincides with them, as it does when we have acquired it a moment before by listening to or reading a text.*

Because the meaning of the text is not something tangible, like the text itself, Polanyi argues that knowledge and thought are predominantly tacit. According to him, we are always aware of the character and essence of our knowledge. Yet we are not necessarily aware of "its innumerable items." This is akin to Plato's conception of eidos, that is, the form of a given thought, than as a catalogue of specific areas of knowledge.

The meeting ground between tacit knowledge (what we know) and its articulation cannot become a 'third' party. That would defeat the clarity that articulation brings to the conversation concerning tacit knowledge. The hair-splitting that would ensue, if articulation is converted into a third party between what we know and what can be said about it, would be damaging to truth. If the latter occurs, the

attention garnered by articulation-as-a-third-party would grow exponentially, until the significance of the initial question – how to articulate tacit knowledge? –vanishes altogether. Of course, this form of bloated pedantry goes against the grain of knowledge and truth-seeking. This is the form of postmodernism that disqualifies academic philosophy from being taken seriously as philosophical reflection on metaphysical/existential concerns. Polanyi has choice words about this topic:

*The gap between the tacit and the articulate tends to produce everywhere a cleavage between sound common sense and dubious sophistication, from which the animal is quite free.*

Articulation of knowledge is geared toward confirmation and communication of objective knowledge. Polanyi's thought strives to steer clear of reductionism and radical skepticism. Truth, he argues, ought to be pursued as an end in itself. This suggests that thought is not premeditated. Truth seekers must embrace a course of reflection and research that is intellectually honest. Polanyi settled upon this conviction after his conversations with Nikolai Bukharin, the Soviet strategist who told him that science needed to be placed at the service of the State. This communist aberration, which made science a State-mandated activity, was to serve only one end: to respond to the demands of the latest five-year plan of the centralized Soviet economy. This form of State-sanctioned science is not disinterested. Polanyi was horrified to witness the extent to which human thought had been politicized and corrupted by Marxism in the Soviet Union:

*Every time our existing framework deals with an event*

*anticipated by it, it has to modify itself to some extent accordingly. And this is even more true of the educated mind; the capacity continually to enrich and enliven its own conceptual framework by assimilating new experiences is the mark of an intelligent personality.*

In contrast to the aforementioned, the mind's ability to conceptualize the essences that inform human experience resists being made into a science of mind. One reason why this is impossible, and why the Soviet repressive State apparatus did not succeed in making science into a handmaiden of communist ideology indefinitely, is that man's rational framework, practically speaking, is infinite.

Polanyi poses the question: why do we entrust the life and guidance of thought to our conceptions? The answer, he argues, is that reason is capable of coming into contact with aspects of objective reality. This statement is an essential component of Polanyi's thought because it demonstrates how reason can grasp human reality. Polanyi does not suggest that man can possess total knowledge of objective reality. He explains:

*The fact that our intellectual strivings make effective progress during a period of incubation without any effort on our part is in line with the latent character of all knowledge.*

Articulation brings to light latent knowledge through what are essentially *a priori* synthetic concepts that become fully known in their being worked out. Polanyi views this working out as a process that involves rational calculation and intuition. He tells us, "The manner in which the mathematician works his way towards discovery, by shifting his confidence

from intuition to compulsion and back again from computation to intuition, while never releasing his hold on either of the two, represents in miniature the whole range of operations by which articulation disciplines and expands the reasoning power of man."

One of the many strokes of genius that one encounters in Polanyi's thought is his critique of philosophic 'doubt-as-sport.' By all accounts, his criticism of doubt-as-sport is a philosophical novelty in postmodern philosophy.

Polanyi credits St. Augustine with addressing ancient Greek philosophy and demonstrating that knowledge should be conceived as originating in the grace of God. This is important, he argues, because it is a recognition that knowledge is personal. That is, of the person and, by implication, tacit in make-up. Citing St. Augustine, Polanyi writes:

*His maxim nisi credideritis non intelligitis expresses this logical requirement. It 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. Our fundamental beliefs are continuously reconsidered in the course of such a process, but only within the scope of their own basic premises.*

Polanyi's critique of philosophic doubt conceives of belief as a form of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge accepts belief during the time it takes reason to deliberate on the evidence available. Belief in God, according to him, acts as a form of indwelling that can only be apprehended in serving God, the same way that we serve beauty, truth or retributive justice.

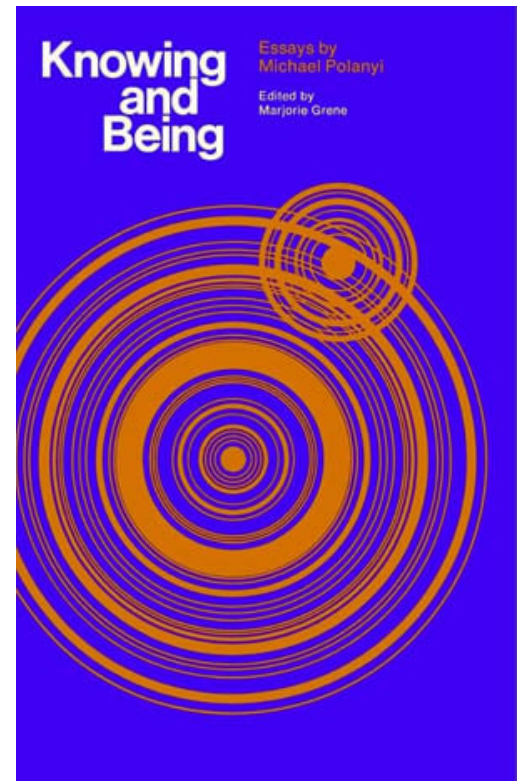
Polanyi contends that comprehension becomes one with its object of knowledge. We recognize this in mathematics, art and literature in the extent that we come to know the inner logic of these disciplines.

Polanyi's conversion to Catholicism in 1923 is worthy of interest, though, for the purpose of this essay, it is sufficient to point out that religious belief requires that believers undertake a rite of passage that delivers them to genuine understanding. The point that Polanyi makes in this regard is that religious belief cannot be divorced from tacit knowledge:

*This relation of factual clues to a heuristic vision is similar to the relation of factual experience to mathematics and to works of art. The analogy brings religious faith into line with these great articulate systems which are also based on experience, but which the mind can yet inhabit without asserting any definite empirical facts.*

**Articulation of knowledge must remain practical**

One cannot lose track of the purpose of articulation. Can articulation of knowledge be a scientific pursuit? Articulation of knowledge serves as a tool of our striving for understanding and ability to communicate objective truth. This places human beings at the center of the pursuit of knowledge. Polanyi does not deny this. Yet he contends that while individuals must act responsibly in seeking knowledge, the understanding they receive is not the result of their own invention or creation. Personal responsibility in science and philosophy is an integral part of Polanyi's thought.



Responsibility in knowledge-seeking is essential, Polanyi informs us, because it sets up an ideal standard of measurement. While ideals may not be fully realizable, they nevertheless force thoughtful people to orient their rational pursuits to the search for objective knowledge. In other words, the responsible vision, as the Spanish philosopher Julián Marías refers to this, makes for the possibility of attaining transcendent knowledge. Polanyi writes: "I have said that the shaping of knowledge by the knower can lay claim to universal validity by submitting to a strict sense of responsibility."

## **Articulation of Knowledge Takes New Meaning in Polanyi's Thought**

Articulation of Knowledge can no longer be viewed as the end result of language or speech. Rather, articulation acts as a kind of de-militarized zone between what is implicitly known



and its outward presentation as communicable: objective knowledge. This process must remain a practical endeavor. The act of articulation in Polanyi's thought is an admission that the nature of man is characterized by the zest for transcendence, even with the realization that man will always lack full knowledge about the nature of knowledge itself, and the objective reality that we strive to understand.

Articulation is a vehicle by which man's rational ordering principle enacts the task of uncovering the nature of objective truth. A sincere observation that can be made concerning the make-up of our striving for knowledge: full disclosure of objective knowledge may remain unfulfillable. This realization has profound implications for all areas of human study.

Reflection on human nature, a subject that is central to Polanyi's thought, informs all of his work. Honest reflection on human nature has tremendous implication for Polanyi's understanding of free and democratic societies, and the inevitable spiritual, cultural and economic conditions that mark the daily lives of individuals in democratic nations.

See Michael Polanyi: *The Contempt of Freedom: The Russian Experiment and After* (1940), *The Study of Man* (1959), *Beyond Nihilism* (1960), *Science, Faith, and Society* (1964) and *The Tacit Dimension* (1967).

## [Table of Contents](#)

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Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included [\*Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay\*](#), [\*Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man\*](#), [\*Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy\*](#) and [\*Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity\*](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in [\*Philosophy Today\*](#) Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is [\*Philosophical Perspective on Cinema\*](#).

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