

Critical Realism and the New Perspective

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A well known British biblical scholar has described himself as a “critical realist.”¹ Critical realism is the philosophical foundation for this person’s view of “knowing” about Christ as well as knowing about his “resurrection”.² Since competing views are in a “state of collapse” he argues that “critical realism...is required for a coherent epistemology.”³

This short study has very limited goals: to trace some of the historical and philosophical backgrounds to the development of critical realism, to make a brief connection between critical realism and language philosophy, and to summarize how such philosophical thinking has impacted contemporary New Testament theology.⁴

Polanyi: Biography

The founder of critical realism was Michael Polanyi (1891-1976). It seems that the best way to comprehend Polanyi is to think of him as a scientist who was dissatisfied with how philosophers explained his field of endeavor- and from that dissatisfaction Polanyi developed his own massive

1 Opposing both positivist and phenomenalist, N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Fortress Press, 1992), 35, proposes: “... a form of *critical realism*. This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’).” There are personal reasons for Wright’s adoption of this philosophy. After finishing his education Wright was appointed as a research fellow at Merton College (Oxford) and overlapped with his colleague Polanyi for one year.

2 The Edinburgh theologian T. F. Torrance was also a proponent of Polanyi’s critical realism- and he in turn influenced the Oxford professor Alister McGrath. See Torrance’s “Michael Polanyi and the Christian Faith - A Personal Report,” in Polanyisociety. Ibid, *Belief in Science and in the Christian Life. The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh, 1980).

3 Wright, *NTPG*, 32. Using the analogy of a telescope, Wright acknowledges that some objects are not within its range and some are situated so that when you view one object you may be unable to see a second. When it comes to historical writings, the telescope may distort or give errors of perspective to the object (event). Additional lenses may be needed to correct the telescope’s errors. Nevertheless, the view through the telescope is of an event. Wright, *NTPG*, 90: “Critical realism, not the abandonment of knowledge of the extra-linguistic world, is required for a coherent epistemology.”

4 Critical realism in the United States has been influenced by the thinker Bernard Lonergan.

epistemological system.⁵ He was not a “normal” scientist — or philosopher. To explain, his life story runs along these lines.

Born in the last decade of the nineteenth century to a Jewish family from Hungary, Polanyi was trained as a physician in Budapest (1914) and served as such during the First World War. While on sick-leave he attained a Ph. D. (1919). He then began research in Germany and was elected to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institut für Physicalische Chemie three years later.

A decade after that honor, Polanyi discerned the problems connected with the rise of Germany’s National Socialism and moved to England in 1933.⁶ While living in England, Polanyi was made a fellow of the Royal Society (in 1944), and taught as Professor of physical chemistry and social studies at the University of Manchester.⁷

Positivism

The Czech scientist had problems with “positivism”- the way that science was comprehended when Polanyi was a student. He felt that positivism had too great a tendency toward “reductionism”- the notion that all ideas derive from a single homogeneous type. He also believed that positivism did not square with the way in which he thought — or did his science in the laboratory. Also, positivism did not seem strong enough to bear the burden of a comprehensive philosophical system.⁸

Polanyi’s first major publication, *Science, Faith, and Society* (1945), was a critique of positivism.⁹ That volume was in great part a reaction to Einstein’s theory. Polanyi was convinced that Einstein’s

5 Eugene Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 30-31, argues that his thinking stemmed from dissatisfaction with positivism. Jerry H. Gill underlines that Polanyi wanted to counteract scientific “objectivity” by establishing a personal dimension to thinking. See his *The Tacit Mode: Michael Polanyi’s Postmodern Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY press, 2000), 53. Marjorie Grene, “Introduction” to *Knowing and Being*, xiii, argues that it was Polanyi’s dissatisfaction with how science was organized that sparked his philosophical reflection.

6 One of his brothers immigrated to Brazil; another went to Italy, and the third traveled to the United States. His fascinating older sister specialized in the study of “rural sociology”. However, the details of Polanyi’s early years are not clear (at least to me!). Drusilla Scott, *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 2, says that he was raised in Hungary and entered the University of Budapest in 1909. Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 26-27, however, hints that Polanyi’s father had already immigrated to Switzerland after the 1848 revolt, studied engineering there, and then married a Russian countess who had also fled to Switzerland because she tried to blow up the Tsar! Thus, was Polanyi born of a dispossessed Jewish family that had emigrated from Hungary, and was then raised in Switzerland? Scott has his academic training entirely in Hungary, with a move to Germany in 1920. Concerning the move to England, Polanyi must have had tremendous linguistic abilities to continue a career in yet another language (his third) at age 41!

7 Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 26-31.

8 Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 32.

9 Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society*, (Oxford, 1946; reprinted Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964). Polanyi’s opposition to a positivist account of science is that it ignores the role personal commitments play in the practice of science. The University of Manchester wisely changed his chair after its appearance — so that he no longer had to teach. See Scott, *Everyman Revived*, 3.

work, moving from absolute time and space to relativity, illustrated well the way scientific knowing actually takes place — but also undermined the philosophical rule of positivism.¹⁰

Polanyi's book demonstrated his philosophical abilities, which then led to an invitation to present the Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen University (for 1951-52).¹¹ The fruit of those lectures was his publication *Personal Knowledge*.¹² As Polanyi's thinking continued to develop, he produced *The Study of Man* at the end of the 1950's, which investigated what he termed "focal" and "subsidiary" awareness.¹³

Analysis of Polanyi's philosophy begins with his attacks on the weaknesses of the then current scientific thought, then moves to a brief presentation of his positive response — the new way of thinking called critical realism.¹⁴

The End of Science's Reign?

In 1959, Polanyi was bold enough to equate the impact that Christianity had on the west in the first three centuries to the influence that science has exercised on the west in the last three. Sadly, he was probably correct. In his analysis, science was now the "supreme intellectual authority."¹⁵

Science's pathway to this pinnacle was easily traceable, according to Polanyi. First, it rebelled against authority, and after a successful rebellion it then led reforms that aided every part of human culture. Science's great reform movement was based upon the presupposition of empirical induction with the goal of developing a mechanistic theory of the universe.

However, this movement of liberation had now turned "pathological".¹⁶ Polanyi was not surprised by the development because, while science could be salutary for a time, eventually people would find out that science's principles were, in his words, "nonsensical", "absurd", even manifestly absurd.¹⁷ One reason for his displeasure with "scientific rationalism" was that its adherents had to profess that everything can, and must, be explained by physics and chemistry. But physics

10 Einstein had responded very positively to the twenty one year old Polanyi's paper on the Third Law of Thermodynamics in 1912. Correspondence between the men continued. See Scott, *Everyman Revived*, 2.

11 In 1948 Polanyi analyzed how money circulated in *Full Employment and Free Trade*. Polanyi argued that a central bank should smooth out the booms and bust of a free market economy.

12 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Routledge, 1958; reprinted [and corrected] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

13 Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1959). Some of his other major works include *The Logic of Liberty* (London and Chicago, 1951).

14 Polanyi stood against eminent contemporary teachers such as Karl Popper, but his critiques touched most of the major philosophical figures — for example Descartes' systematic doubting. See Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 32-39.

15 Michael Polanyi, "The Two Cultures (1959)", reprinted in *Knowing and Being*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 40. He made his point clearly: "It is contrary to religion!" — the objection ruled supreme in the seventeenth century. 'It is unscientific!' is its equivalent in the twentieth."

16 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 41.

17 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 41-42. Polanyi's critique was blunt, 42: "Eventually the truth-bearing power of its absurd ideals was bound to be spent and its stark absurdity to assert itself."

and chemistry, in fact, cannot account for human consciousness — let alone for morality and human responsibility. Yet, instead of facing up to scientific rationalisms inherent limitations, some “distinguished men” simply denied the existence of human consciousness. These men knew that acknowledging human consciousness would endanger their precious science — so they deny consciousness and conterminously embrace scientific “bigotry”.¹⁸

While Polanyi ridiculed such short sightedness, his critical scissors would snip even more deeply into the scientific world’s fabric. He argued that disregarding truth in favor of “scientific ideals” has in fact led to the horrors of modern nihilism.¹⁹ Furthermore, while such personal destruction was quantifiable, Polanyi feared an even greater future terror. The possibility of massive death through atomic weapons loomed as a possibility, a prospect because there was no longer sufficient common philosophical ground between those nations who bear the burden of their own powerful atomic weapons.²⁰

However, Polanyi did not leave his reader without a glimmer of hope. There was still the option that science could repent and recognize that claiming a criterion of objectivity in fact forced denying reality to any moral claims. Polanyi could see change occur only by following one path — the way of revising science’s own worthless claims.²¹

Polanyi’s radical critique of scientific method was established based on his sweeping knowledge of western philosophical tradition. His critical realism was not limited to simply attacking the reigning monarch (science), but demonstrated the need to oust the reigning thinker (Kant) as well.

Polanyi’s Critique of Pure Kant

Deeply embedded within the recesses of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* lies the seed of that great work’s own destruction. The seed is the agency of personal decision used when someone classified a particular incident under a general concept.²² Polanyi could not comprehend how Kant could simply admit of the existence of this powerful mental agency — one that was exempt from analysis (reason). He was also perplexed how generations of Kant scholars left this submission of reason

18 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 42.

19 Polanyi laid these charges at nihilism’s feet — an unnatural division of the human masses, split up of families, and ruined friendships, “as no conflict has done before.”

20 He had already published in 1932, *Atomic Reactions* (London: Williams and Norgate). For more on Polanyi’s development of this idea, see his “Beyond Nihilism (1960)”, in *Knowing and Being*, 3-23.

21 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 46. However, Polanyi did not seem to hold out much actual hope for revision. His footnotes contained the narrative of an encounter at the meeting of the American Association of the Advancement of Science (in 1956). His challenges proved ineffective. If the master himself was incapable of convincing scientists to change — who could hope for lesser lights to be successful?

22 According to Polanyi, Kant referred to this agency twice, first when it was cited as that which “constitutes our so-called mother-wit” and again when Kant asserted that it was a skill so deeply hidden within the human soul that he dubbed this agency “nature’s trick”. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A.133 and A.141, as cited by Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 105.

to some unaccountable decision making to go unchallenged.²³

Polanyi thus took up the challenge to explain Kant's agency of unformalizable mental skills.²⁴ His approach was multi-faceted. First, he attacked the notion of strict scientific objectivity by critiquing the classical theory of mechanics — the mathematical formulae by which the planet's motions are governed.²⁵ Furthermore, the philosophical notion of "randomness" (used to deal with deviation) itself means "random in relationship to potential order". However, that "potential order", Polanyi asserted, is also an informal act of personal interpretation.²⁶

Polanyi's second prong of analysis revolved around how humans recognize significant shapes. Polanyi made a direct connection between this activity and Kant's "inscrutable power", classifying a particular under a general concept.²⁷ One connection was *via* Ames' figures of a man and boy in a room where the boy looks taller than the man. The key to understanding the illusion lies in the clues and assumptions that observers make when they view the object. He argued that there are no exact rules for the use of the clues — even though specialists have noted some general principles relative to interaction between background and figure.²⁸ Polanyi was able to present many scientific examples of this tendency, underlining the important function of peripheral impression used as clues. He described this "art" as that which helps people (relative to perception) "make sense of the world."²⁹ What was significant for Polanyi was the fact that the main clues were inside the body and cannot be experienced "in themselves".³⁰

23 Actually, Polanyi attributed the Kantian silence to their instinctive preference, "to let such sleeping monsters lie, for fear that, once awakened, they might destroy their fundamental conception of knowledge." See Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 106.

24 Polanyi defined Kant's unaccounted for agency this way, *Knowing and Being*, 112: "the mother-wit to which Kant surrenders the application of rules to experience and of that inscrutable power hidden in the bosom of Nature, by which he accounts for our capacity to form and apply universal conceptions — th[is] tacit power...".

25 Mechanics recognizes that observation and theoretical predictions will have deviations. The question the scientist must then face is whether the deviation is random — or whether it demonstrates certain trends. It is the process of determining the nature of the deviation where Polanyi both admits that strict statistical analysis can determine regularity and randomness — but that the application of those mathematical rules cannot be prescribed by strict rules. After a pattern has been chosen (for example direction or periodicity), then the scientist's computations will yield a numerical value for the probability of the pattern. But there are no "rules" to determine the pattern! See Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 107-08.

26 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 109.

27 He analyzed camouflage, background figures, Rubin's "faces/vase", and horizon and rest. See Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 110-11.

28 The rules are summarized in the notion that humans have a tendency to overlook things that are unprecedented. Polanyi stated the principle precisely, *Knowing and Being*, 113: "Whenever we are focusing our attention on a particular object, we are relying for doing so on our awareness of many things to which we are not attending directly at the moment, but which are yet functioning as compelling clues for the way the object of our attention will appear to our senses."

29 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 114-15.

30 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 115.

It was from this wealth of analysis that Polanyi turned upon Kant, and doubted that Kant was correct in his despair relative to the philosopher's ability to elucidate this agency. While much can be known about it, argued Polanyi, very little could be articulated with exactitude.

Polanyi concluded by tying his opening rifle shot aimed at Kant to a frontal blast focused on scientific work in general, and epistemology in particular.³¹ What was needed was nothing less than a new definition of "experience" itself.³² The next step toward understanding critical realism is to investigate how one "knows".

Tacit Knowledge

Polanyi knew that a scientist worked in this manner: he began with a question that searched for a rational order, and then moved to a solution to the question. To work as a scientist, Polanyi recognized that there were times when he "knew more than he can tell".³³ The positivist philosophers could not account for such knowledge, labeled by Polanyi "tacit" knowledge. Polanyi is best known in some circles for his analysis of "tacit" knowledge.³⁴

On the one side is "explicit" knowledge that comes from reading a book or hearing a lecture. Yet, anyone who has ridden a bicycle or learned to drive a car knows that knowing how to ride or drive cannot simply be taught from a book — or even by an expert instructor. The knowledge that goes beyond the "explicit" is the "tacit". Furthermore, in the world of music, students find out rather painfully that sometimes the great instrumental masters are not sure how to "teach" (as though explicit) their art (which is tacit). A final example of tacit knowledge is facial recognition. When we know someone's face we can pick it out from among a hundred others — even if we cannot articulate how we recognize the face that we know. Instead of knowing the person's individual features, we recognize the face as a whole. Polanyi's notion of tacit knowledge also included a host of beliefs, values, and mental models, some of which are unconscious. This cognitive dimension of tacit knowledge shapes the way people perceive the world — even if it cannot always be verbally articulated.³⁵ It is through tacit awareness that people are connected with external reality and tacit awareness provides the context for meaningful statements.

31 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 118: "It is customary today to represent the process of scientific inquiry as the setting up of a hypothesis followed by its subsequent testing. I cannot accept these terms." 119: "My own answer to this paradox is to restate an ancient metaphysical conception in new terms."

32 Important for Christian theologians is that a new definition of "eternal reality" was also needed — an important topic but beyond the limits of this paper. See Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 120.

33 Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 4.

34 Polanyi is best known in some circles for his analysis of "tacit" knowledge. Critics sometimes described Polanyi's philosophy as merely a commentary on the fact of human consciousness. Such a dismissal does not take Polanyi's own assertions seriously. He claimed to present to the world, "a new theory of knowledge" ("Faith and Reason", *The Journal of Religion*, XLI/4, (1961), 241) a claim based upon what seems to this author to be a mountain of evidence that had begun in 1946.

35 Critics argued that the concept of "tacit" knowing was not really knowing at all. See Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 26-31; 40-52.

A final example of tacit knowledge is Polanyi's notion of language. All language students have painfully learned that memorizing grammatical rules (explicit) does not mean that a person knows a foreign language. On the other hand, someone learns their mother tongue as a child without need for any formal grammar (i.e., tacitly) — that explicit component would be included in their later instruction. It is from the notion of language itself as tacit knowledge that we turn to the next topic.

Polanyi and Austin

John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960) was a philosopher of language who developed current theory of speech acts.³⁶ In general, he and Polanyi both had a critical attitude toward scientific "detachment" connected to the notion that knowledge was simply "descriptive information" about "objective" facts. In other words, they stood against the ontology of an oversimplified empiricism.³⁷ They also recognized that some assertions have a self-involving character.

More specifically, they shared two philosophical ideas. The first involved Polanyi's tacit knowledge. Polanyi argued that when a psychiatrist recognized a disease, say an epileptic seizure, there was no exactly specifiable criteria for such recognition. The psychiatrist needed something "more" and that "more" was called "understanding" or "comprehension".³⁸ "Understanding" came when there was a comprehension of all of the observed particulars by the psychiatrist, and he came to an awareness of the "entity as a whole".

This type of understanding, according to Polanyi, was specifically excluded by a positivistic epistemology because it refuses "to acknowledge the existence of comprehensive entities as distinct from their particulars."³⁹ Yet, for Polanyi this complex of the one and many was the central act of knowing.⁴⁰

As Polanyi had a psychiatrist identify an epileptic seizure, so Austin had a goldfinch fly onto a branch. In response to the question, "How do you know it's a goldfinch?", Austin proposed different answers. A proper answer steered between a too definite answer, "because it has a yellow head" (stereotyped empiricism), and leaned towards one that simply "recognized" that it was a goldfinch from its yellow head.⁴¹ The two answers to the question differed materially, according

36 He was educated at Balliol College, Oxford and became White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at his *alma mater* after the Second World War. With Wittgenstein, Austin advocated examining the way people use words to understand the word's meaning.

37 Ian Ramsey, "Polanyi and J. L. Austin", in *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, edited by T. A. Langford and W. Poteat (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 170.

38 Ramsey, "Polanyi and Austin", 171-72.

39 Polanyi, "Faith and Reason", in *The Journal of Religion* 41/4 (1961), 240, as cited by Ramsey, "Polanyi and Austin", 172.

40 This connects to Polanyi's notion of facial recognition.

41 Ramsey, "Polanyi and Austin", 173-74.

to Austin, because words like “from” or “by” have an important “vagueness”.⁴² The issue was “recognition” for Austin, not proof by descriptive assertion.⁴³

There is a similarity between Austin’s “recognition” of the goldfinch and Polanyi’s psychiatric “comprehension” of the epilepsy. Both philosophers would concur that the particulars (or details) were only a part of the story, against a simplistic positivism, that would think that the particulars were the whole story.⁴⁴ Thus, Polanyi’s “tacit awareness” (comprehension) was similar to Austin’s “recognition” which goes beyond separately described features.⁴⁵

The second major place of agreement between the two thinkers was the notion of self involvement. The point of contact was Polanyi’s “personal knowledge” and Austin’s notion of “convictional language.” At this place they both recognized that the speech act, the personal act of affirmation, was epistemologically ultimate.⁴⁶

Analysis of critical realism, as developed by Polanyi, with its at least tangential connection to British language philosophy, provides at least part of the epistemological underpinnings for proponents of the New Perspective on Paul.

Positivism and the New Perspective⁴⁷

Specifically citing Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*, Wright argues against naïve realism and positivism for an epistemology based upon critical realism.⁴⁸ A critical realist epistemology requires that every person (as well historical writer) can only observe from the human point of view.⁴⁹ Second, critical realism requires that all sense experience is filtered through a grid of expectations and stories relative to the individual’s physical location and the lenses through which he obtains his worldview. All the parts of the particulars of the external world must be viewed within the overall worldview. Each person makes those “facts” “fit” their own worldview. Finally, that grid is intimately connected to the person’s “community”. Wright’s conclusion is that all

42 J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 53, as cited by Ramsey, “Polanyi and Austin”, 174.

43 It seems that for Austin, to “recognize” is not necessarily the same as to “know”.

44 Ramsey, “Polanyi and Austin”, 175.

45 See Polanyi, “The Creative Imagination” (1966) as cited by Ramsey, “Polanyi and Austin”, 176-77.

46 Ramsey, “Polanyi and Austin”, 193.

47 This section is indebted to colleague Dr. Jeffrey Stivason.

48 While N.T. Wright’s, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), has an index of modern authors, Polanyi’s name does not appear.

49 Wright argues that no human being can view things from God’s standpoint. See Wright, *NTPG*, 36.

statements have a provisional nature.⁵⁰

In thus rejecting positivism, the result is that there is no such thing as a “bare event” for him.⁵¹ Furthermore, embracing critical realism means that there is nothing, “...simply objectively true, some things about which we can have, and actually do have, solid and unquestionable evidence.”⁵² To assume critical realism means that Scripture’s teaching may not be reduced to a set of “objective maxims” or timeless truths.⁵³

Observing the world through the lens or grid of critical realism furthermore means rejecting history as simply recording what actually happened or the notion of fact as something purely objective. History always involves selection, and selection requires personal interpretation.⁵⁴ History is “...the meaningful narrative of events and intentions” with emphasis on intentions.⁵⁵

Conclusion

This study has briefly traced some of the backgrounds of critical realism. It has not attempted to be comprehensive; for example it did not underscore critical realism’s helpfulness when combating the ungodly arrogance of scientific materialism. A few lines of connection were made between critical realism and British language philosophy. These movements provide part of the background for at least one scholar who holds to the New Perspective on Paul.

50 Wright, *NTPG*, 35: “This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’)...” 37: “...it will not do to say... there simply are some things which can still be said, on the basis of empirical sense-data, about the world external to the observer(s). No: instead of working from the particulars of observation, or ‘sense-data’, to confident statements about external reality, positivistically conceived, critical realism...sees knowledge of particulars as taking place within the larger framework of the story or worldview which forms the basis of the observer’s way of being in relation to the world.”

51 Wright, *NTPG*, 63. While presuppositional apologetics also rightly acknowledges that there are no brute facts, Wright’s notion is different in that he does not allow for God’s interpretation of the “facts”.

52 Wright, *NTPG*, 32-33.

53 Wright, *NTPG*, 39.

54 Wright, *NTPG*, 83: “All knowing and understanding has to do with reflection on the part of human beings: all knowledge comes *via* somebody’s perceptions and reflections.” “... the legacy of positivism often seduces us into imagining that a ‘fact’ is a ‘purely objective’ thing, unalloyed by the process of knowing on anybody’s part. But in reality what we call ‘facts’ always belong in a context of response, perception, and interaction – a process which is both complex and continuing. Stories... are more fundamental than ‘facts’; the parts must be seen in light of the whole.”

55 Wright, *NTPG*, 82.