



Comparative Philosophy

Michael Polanyi and Lucian Blaga as Philosophers of Knowledge

Angela Botez

Institute of Philosophy Romanian Academy, Bucharest

abotez@thorr.racai.ro

ABSTRACT: Polanyi and Blaga are two centennial philosophers who could be compared. They both are philosophers who have abandoned the attempt to analyze science as the form of culture capable of complete objectivity and the language solely in terms of its referential force, to make representational knowledge impersonal and to split fact from value.

1. Polanyi's epistemology

Polanyi and Blaga are two centennial philosophers who could be put into comparison. Both are philosophers who have abandoned the attempt to analyze science as the form of culture capable of complete objectivity, to analyze language solely in terms of its referential force, and to make representational knowledge impersonal and to split fact from value.

Michael Polanyi affirms the irreducible involvement of personal commitment in the perception and understanding of transpersonal reality. He is against the representational expressivist theory of language. According to his theory all assertion of fact expresses beliefs, and are essentially accompanied by feelings of satisfaction or of desire. The act of knowing includes an appraisal, a personal coefficient that shapes all factual knowledge. Polanyi emphasizes the role of the activity of the knower in the formation of knowledge and also is aware of their variability while insisting that we aim at truth 'with universal intent' 'although we can never quite get there'. His book *Personal Knowledge* should help to restore science to its rightful place in an integrated culture as part of the whole person's continuing endeavor to make sense of the totality of his experience. 'True' means something different in different societies.

The critical period of Western philosophy, opened by Descartes and brought to its coming to an end, and the post-critical era is emerging. Michael Polanyi, it appears to me, is the most important philosophical figure opening up this new direction and delineating its basic elements. Regarding the critical pretensions to have found a way, either through philosophical rationality or by means of scientific method, to a universal perspective, Polanyi points out that thinkers of the critical period have pursued 'a mistaken ideal of objectivity'.

Thus, when we claim greater objectivity for Copernican theory, we do imply that its excellence

is, not a matter of personal taste on our part, but an inherent quality deserving universal acceptance by rational creatures. We abandon the cruder anthropocentrism of our senses, but only favor of a more ambitious anthropocentrism of our reason (PK p. 4-5)

Can we find traces of modernist doctrines in the Polanyi's 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 but 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, but also 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 of personal responsibility'. This doctrine of the tacit component of assertion is in significant respects similar to Searle's theory of speech acts. So there is no modernism here either. According to the *objectivist ideal*, knowledge, in order to be reliable, must be *totally determinate, totally accounted for by empirical data*. In this epistemological system *the knower's* function is simply that of seeing clearly the meaning that inheres in the empirically *not* that of interpretation that contaminates the pure data with an unreliable element.

In the first chapter of *Personal Knowledge*, titled 'Objectivity', Polanyi redefines objectivity, stripping away the objectivist meanings that he has found distorting the proper meaning of the term. Objectivity, he insists, does not mean an utter dependence upon empirical data. The *objectivity* of Copernicus, which objectivism holds up as a model of *reliance on empirical data*, was not this of objectivity at all. In fact, the preponderance of empirical data supported the proposition that the sun orbited around the earth, not Copernicus' heliocentric theory. The objectivity that *Copernicus* modeled — true objectivity — is a knowledge, which *relies to a greater extent on theory rather than on more immediate sensory experience*. *Objectivity* is the capacity to make the creative imaginative leap that synthesizes the data into a comprehensive, rational theoretical *structure* that can be shown to be true from numerous perspectives beyond simply the logical perspective that one has on the empirical data.

Polanyi says,

According to the theory of Personal Knowledge, *all meaning lies in the comprehension of a set of particulars in terms of a coherent entity — a comprehension that is a personal act that can never be replaced by a formal operation.* (M).

The *triadic* structure of personal knowledge distinguishes Polanyi's epistemology from both objectivist epistemologies and subjectivist epistemologies. An objectivist epistemology rejects the vital role of the knower in interpreting or comprehending the empirical data. A subjectivist epistemology rejects the empirical data as contributing to any ultimate meaning. Personal knowledge is characterized by a *bipolar commitment*. This commitment has both a personal and a universal component. Or, as Polanyi summarized it at one point:

We have seen *tacit knowledge* to comprise two kinds of awareness, *subsidiary awareness* and *focal awareness*. Now we see tacit knowledge opposed to *explicit knowledge*; but these two are not sharply divided. While tacit knowledge can be possessed by itself, explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood and applied. Hence, all knowledge is *either tacit or tacit*

The implications of Polanyi's conception of knowledge could be:

First, the fiduciary dimension of knowing is recovered. Humans rely upon elements from their social location, tradition, and community in order to affirm that what they believe is knowledge.

Second, the knower in postcritical perspective is not an individualistic knower but rather he is helped by and relies for validation upon the community and its culture, which the knower embodies. Critical hermeneutics is dyadic in structure — the knower and the known. Postcritical hermeneutics is *triadic* in structure, involving a knower rooted in culture and community, that is being interpreted within its context, and those for whom the interpretation is intended, who are also rooted in culture and community.

Third, the structure makes it impossible to accept the detached objectivism of critical epistemology as a certain path to final Truth. Indeed, the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity in knowing is dissolved, and a quite different conception of what is true and real emerges. As Polanyi puts it "To hold a natural law to be true is to believe that its presence will manifest itself in an indeterminate range of yet unknown and perhaps unthinkable consequences...". We meet here with a new definition of reality. The real is that which is expected to reveal itself indeterminately in the future. Hence an explicit statement can bear on reality only by virtue of the tacit coefficient associated with it.

2. Blaga's epistemology

In the same manner the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga, (1895-1961) realized that science is unstable, an instability brought about by the very historical relativity of cultural creations of which science is a part. Science is obviously influenced by the categories of styles, by the force-lines of a stylistic field (matrix). The value guiding man to knowledge is truth. The definition of truth itself as a positive adequacy of a content of knowledge to reality is actually only a desire, notes Blaga. He criticizes the theories of science, which reduce all knowledge to what he calls, 'Paradisiac knowledge' in which certain *invariant categories are applied in perception and representational cognition*. Science also requires 'Luciferian knowledge' which applies *deeper categories, stylistic ones, relating to man's existence within the horizon of mystery*.

Empirical observations, maintained Blaga, obviously go hand in hand with certain interpretations. Interpretations, in their turn, are marked not only by theoretical perspectives, but by psycho-sociological frameworks, too. The numerous interpretations that cumulate in the body of science as pure and available material are far too often imbued with 'theory': and moreover, the same material of simple observation is in reality contaminated by the 'stylistic' orientations of the human mind. 'We Europeans since a Leonardo da Vinci, a Galileo, a Newton laid the foundation of sciences, since a Descartes, Leibniz, Locke and Kant legitimized the possibility of science, have lived with the belief that it is a perennial intangible and superhistorical entity.

We had to experience shocks like those caused by the theory of relativity and wave mechanics to realize, in a lucid manner, that science is unstable, an instability brought about by the very historical relativity of spiritual creations of which science is a part.

Science comprises a constructional part in which occur theoretical constructions obviously

influenced by style. Science, therefore, is not superhistorical: it is born in a field of socio-cultural force-lines that shape it. As a matter of fact, the results of science are brewed also on the intellectual horizon of the human being and they emerge as 'values'-alike to those produced in the ethical field and on the aesthetic plane.

For the sake of man's self preservation, the philosophy of science has reduced science to a type of empirical knowledge. But for science, empirical data are but a threshold: one must go beyond them and interpret them in the light of theoretical stances. Scientific fictions do not appear only on a biological and pragmatic level technical contrivances do; they are the outcome of a specific intellectual purpose. Blaga's stylistic studies of science demonstrate that anthropology and the study of culture are capable of shedding light on the philosophical problematic of science especially by elucidating the nature of creative factors in the history of thinking. He claims: It is worth observing that, due to the quantum theory, modern physics affirms the antinomic structure of light: the phenomenon of light is perceived as being an 'undulation' as well as something 'corpuscular', which is a logically incomprehensible paradox. Still, some experiences necessarily demand this antinomic solution. This is why modern physics is subject to a crisis, Blaga believes that he was succeeded in demonstrating that this undular-corpuscular theory of light's nature is actually *a part of a sui-generis type of knowledge, that he called 'minus-knowledge'. 'It is not a crisis of modern physics but a new type of knowledge that we're dealing with'.* We already know that Kant built a theory of knowledge that was actually meant philosophically to justify Newton's classical physics. Thus the necessity for philosophically justifying new constructions in physics by means of a new theory of knowledge is imperative. This is, essentially, what Blaga tried to archive in *The Dogmatic Aeon* and *Luciferian Knowledge* especially, *by providing the theory of knowledge with the concept of 'direction'.* Knowledge has not, the belief is since Kant, a unique direction (plus), i.e. to 'attenuate' mysteries, by means of an infinite theoretical process; knowledge has two opposite directions that, is, plus and minus. And there are circumstances when the 'minus' direction is required that does not attenuate a mystery, but, on the contrary, intensifies and radicalizes it, rendering it in formulas exclusively antinomic.

Thus, the new idea appears as a 'bridge towards the cryptic' (as an apprehension of essences) in a *theoric* (paradigmatic) kind of thinking. The mechanistic and the relativist ideas, Blaga says, are the *theoric* ideas by which Newton and Einstein, respectively, opened the horizon of a *mystery*, proposing theoretical construction of the open *mystery*. More over the *theoretic* idea carries weight in the structural joints of *Luciferian knowledge* even when it is dismissed later on (see the idea of phlogiston). The *theoric* (paradigmatic) function can be fulfilled by a principle, a law, a category, a concept a scheme. The achievability of *theoric* is one of the problems mentioned by Blaga that represents something similar to the capacity of scientific paradigms and their scope of applicability as imagined by Kuhn. Luciferian knowledge is very often achieved through *Minus-cognition* which means neither a lack of knowledge nor a harmless label stuck on all the mistakes of cognition, but instead, a type of cognition conducted in a direction somehow contrary to the usual one, a cognition capable of progress and motion ahead. The minus-cognition formulas go from a minimum of incomprehensibility to a maximum of incomprehensibility, which is seen as an abstract build-up, with no correspondence in the factual world. *Minus cognition* is not anti-logic but meta-logic; it does not deny, but, on the contrary, it delineates perceptions through new logic. It expands the unknown by defining it, by formulas, therefore, this kind of condition is properly named minus-cognition, as against the plus-cognition which curtails the unknown.

3. Polanyi and Blaga

In an article 'Some Notes on Michael Polanyi and Lucian Blaga', ⁽⁵⁾ R. T. Allen observes that the two philosophers were both interested in the deep structures of the mind and its knowledge, the structures of which they both emphasize. We are not normally aware that they guide our proximate knowledge and action. Both of them were thus radically opposed to those empiricist and representationalist theories which, in Locke's words, regard the mind as a 'blank tablet' passively receiving 'impressions', and to Positivist philosophies which deny the very existence of frameworks of thought and interpretation of experience. Equally, and unlike Kant, they had a sense of the historical and developing character of those structures and frameworks, yet, unlike many postmodern thinkers, they also emphasized our commitment to truth and to revealing the real world that is independent of our knowing. These are the lines that any genuine philosophy must take. In particular, they both recognized that reality transcends our cognitive abilities and that it cannot be confined within any formulas. Blaga regards mystery as an essential and distinctive feature of man and human awareness, a permanent background to all our knowledge. He criticizes the theories of cognition, and especially of science, which reduce all knowledge to what he calls Type 1 (of 'paradisiac') knowledge, in which certain categories, not varying greatly across history, are applied fairly straightforwardly in perception and action. In contrast, science also requires Type 2 (or 'Luciferian') knowledge which applies deeper categories, relating to man's distinctive existence within a horizon of mystery and revealing those mysteries. These categories are much less fixed and general, and are themselves guided by yet deeper, 'abyssal', categories that form a 'stylistic field'. Blaga rejects the Positivist characterization of such categories, e. g. teleology in biology, as 'useful fiction', and stresses that they function to reveal mysteries. Polanyi likewise emphasizes the roles of intellectual frameworks and the activity of the knower in the formation of our knowledge, and also is aware of their variability while insisting that we aim at truth 'with universal *intent*', although we can never quite get there, a point that Blaga also makes. Polanyi again criticized the 'pseudo-substitutions' offered for the notion of truth ('economy', 'simplicity' Kant's 'regulative ideas') which tacitly trade on the notion of truth which they are supposed to replace. He also maintained that reality outruns our attempts to know it and that it cannot be confined within our formulas. He developed a doctrine of degrees of reality: that the more an object reveals hitherto unsuspected aspects of itself, the more real it is; so that minds are more real than stones. And in his account of tacit knowing he showed that 'We know more than we can tell' (TD p. 4), that aspects of both the object known and our activity of knowing cannot be made explicit and put into words and formulas. In that respect he too holds that mystery is an essential part of man and his life in the world. Also in Blaga's conception of 'minus-knowledge', the function of which is not just to show that certain questions, problems and lines of research are empty or fruitless (the discovery that there is nothing to be discovered) but to reveal that there is a mystery and not a final formula, more to be known, and a deepening of the revealed mystery.

A question arises about 'minus-knowledge': How can we know what we do not know? For, it seems either we know something or we know not; either it is revealed or it remains unknown. Polanyi provided an answer to this question. All our knowledge is the tacit integration of one set of things tacit integration of one set of things *from* which we attend into a focal apprehension. Blaga answers: All the discovered truths enlarge the area of what we do not know structure the unknown.

Notes

- (1) See, A. F. Sanders, 'Tacit knowing between modernism and postmodernism', *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 18, 1991-2.
- (2) See, Charles S. McCoy, 'The Polanyian Revolution', *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 18, 1991-2.
- (3) L. Blaga, *Trilogy of Value (Science and Creation)*, Bucharest, Editura Fundațiilor Regale, 1942, p . 74.
- (4) Horia Vintila, Foreword to *Eonul Dogmatic (The Dogmatic Aeon)*, French trans. , Paris, L'Age de l'homme, 1986.
- (5) R. T. Allen, 'Some notes on Michael Polanyi and Lucian Blaga', *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie*, nr. 1-2, 1996.
- (6) Angela Botez, *Blaga, Creation and Cognition*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească, 1983.
-

[Top of page](#)



[Home](#)

Paideia logo design by **Janet L. Olson**.
All Rights Reserved