

PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE IN PERSPECTIVE: A REPLY TO R.T. ALLEN'S
QUESTIONS

The October 1987 issue of CONVIVIUM (No. 25, pp. 48-54) contains an article by R.T. Allen entitled "Polanyi and Truth" (hereafter "PT"), in which the author claims to "take up the challenge posed by Mr. S. Palmquist's 'A Kantian Critique of Polanyi's 'Post-Critical Philosophy'" (CONVIVIUM No. 24, March 1987 [pp. 1-11])." In that article (hereafter "KCP") I intended to "use Kant's philosophy as a sounding board to help pinpoint some unfortunate misunderstandings contained in PK" ("KCP" 2). I presupposed, for the purpose of that rather modest task, an interpretation of Kant's philosophy which I had developed in full elsewhere. In deference to any readers who questioned or failed to understand this interpretation as summarized in "KCP", I referred in the footnotes to seven of the articles I have written in its defense (see "KCP" 10-11).

Mr. Allen states at the outset of "PT" that "I shall not comment upon Kant but shall try to clarify what Polanyi said" ("PT" 48). He does this by discussing seven of the "problems" which "KCP" raised about Polanyi's position. In the course of his discussion he addresses a number of questions directly to me and calls for a public clarification of my position. I will do my best in the present article to respond to Allen's queries. However, I must make quite clear at the outset that he has to a certain extent asked for the impossible. "KCP" was openly and explicitly based on Kant's Critical philosophy, not on Polanyi's alleged Post-Critical philosophy. A full appreciation of the weight of my argument therefore requires some understanding of Kant. The role of Kant's ideas in my critique of Polanyi is not an optional extra that can be "bracketed out", even for the purposes of a reply. Such an illegitimate supposition is at the heart of my most weighty criticism of the very "post-critical" method which Polanyi and his followers advocate: it is the (quasi-positivist) supposition that we can go beyond something or someone merely by ignoring it (or them). Saying "I'm going to object to a Kantian critique of x without

mentioning Kant" is like trying to explain our knowledge of objects without ever mentioning the participation of the subject--and this is something which neither Kant nor Polanyi would condone! My suggestion to Mr. Allen, then, is that, if he finds my criticisms of Polanyi difficult to understand, he should read my published articles (offprints are available upon request). This is particularly important because, in the remainder of this article I will be unable (given the aforementioned intentions of "KCP") to follow his lead: although I will concentrate on clarifying my attitude towards Polanyi, I will again be unable to do so without making some reference to Kant.

The following comments correspond to Allen's seven numbered sections (1-4 and 6-8; no section 5 appears in "PT").

1. In "KCP" 2-3 I criticize Polanyi for failing to make an adequate distinction between "I believe p" and "p is true". I suggest that what is missing in his account is the recognition that, as Kant argued, objective criteria for truth do not preclude, but rather make possible, our personal (i.e. empirical) involvement in knowledge. Allen addresses this issue by noting the importance of recognizing "the difference between the abstract distinction between...truth and error, and the application of that distinction to oneself" ("PT" 48). Against Russell, Polanyi argues (according to Allen) "that science aims at a reality beyond itself, and...that our beliefs are (or should be) anchored by a commitment to a reality beyond them" ("PT" 48). I quite agree with Allen that this marks an advance over the two alternatives he cites: "all denials of the possibility of truth and...all 'Objectivist' claims that truth can be impersonally attained...without the exercise of our (largely tacit) powers of judgment and decision" ("PT" 48). However, this in no way precludes or goes beyond Kant's position. On the contrary, a Kantian reference to non-empirical objective criteria is the only way such a position can be upheld (consistently). Allen is right: Polanyi does say science aims at a transcendent reality, and that beliefs are all grounded in our faith in such a reality. My point in "KCP" was that Kant says much

the same thing, only goes a step further! Polanyi's position just cannot stand on its own. If he says science can actually reach its "aim", that we can actually attain reliable knowledge of reality "as it is" ("PT"49), then he would land right in Russell's lap. But Allen rightly sees that this is not an adequate interpretation of Polanyi, inasmuch as I can never compare my own beliefs "with 'facts' which I do not believe to be facts" ("PT"49). On the other hand--the hand Allen decides to ignore in "PT", but which "KCP" was devoted to elaborating--if Polanyi admits to the impossibility of ever "knowing" this transcendent reality, then he is still left with the problem of distinguishing between knowledge (or truth) and belief. Allen says nothing (in section 1 of "PT") about this issue.

Kant's solution is that "reality" can be viewed in two distinct ways: if we view reality empirically, then we can (and do) attain knowledge of it, knowledge which we can distinguish from mere opinions by its agreement with certain transcendental conditions (or "criteria for truth"); if we view reality transcendentally, then it is unknowable, except that such a point of view enables us to establish just what are the objective criteria for empirical knowledge. (Note that these criteria, though "objective" when viewed empirically, are actually subjective--perhaps we could even say personal--when viewed transcendentally.)

2. Allen thinks Polanyi would probably admit "that some of the conditions [for truth, i.e. for empirical knowledge] can be outlined", but not all of them ("PT" 49). This is unobjectionable (see e.g. PK ch.5). But Polanyi's "conditions" are one and all empirical, and as such they miss the whole point of Kant's transcendental revolution: no set of empirical criteria, no matter how important a role they happen to play in the way we actually gain knowledge, can possibly define how we must gain knowledge. Allen also points out that Polanyi would insist that objective (impersonal) knowledge is impossible because there is always, in every act of knowing, at least an "implicit exercise of faith", and because regarding something as true requires an explicit commitment to some system

of beliefs ("PT" 49). Once again, Polanyi and Allen fail to recognize the difference between two quite distinct types of belief and commitment. In fact, the very examples Allen raises in objection to the notion of objective knowledge can illustrate the distinction between the transcendental and empirical perspectives: "In using a calculator, computer or marking scheme, I commit myself to its truth... Of course, I can operate it mechanically and impersonally but not in order to make correct calculations, draw correct inferences and award valid marks. Once I do that, I personally...commit myself..." ("PT" 50). But the first commitment (i.e. to the system--e.g. the marking scheme) is transcendental: without that commitment there wouldn't be any marks at all, to say nothing of valid marks. Such a commitment is a necessary condition for the possibility of using the marking scheme, just as space, time and the categories are for Kant necessary conditions for the possibility of experience (and hence, transcendental). But the function of my transcendental faith in such a system is to create a situation in which it is not just possible, but proper to view the results "mechanically" or "impersonally", so far as their empirical validity is concerned. Everyone who has ever used a calculator would surely agree, upon serious reflection, that there is nothing morally, scientifically, or even epistemologically wrong with approaching it with explicitly mechanical intentions. After all, that's what it's for! Our faith in its accuracy is a transcendental presupposition of ever using it, not an empirically significant "fact" about how and/or why it works. (Indeed, many a psychiatrist would be interested in talking to anyone who honestly believes that the correctness of the calculations done on a hand calculator are correct primarily because of the personal relationship which the person establishes with it! If this is not the sort of thing Polanyi means by "personal", then he should be more careful in narrowing down his use of that term--or perhaps just choose a more suitable one.) This is the point being made in "KCP": commitment to a system is fundamentally different from commitment to a fact implied by that system. The former is transcendental (and in a sense "personal"); the latter is empirical (and in an equally legitimate sense "impersonal", though of course,

it too is personal insofar as it is dependent upon a transcendental foundation).

I trust this answers Allen's main query in section 2 of "PT". With respect to the three specific questions he asks at the end of that section, I will add the following remarks. (a) I hope it is now clear that I do not think Polanyi is wrong in claiming that many judgments are personal. Rather, he is wrong in not distinguishing between those personal judgments which are epistemologically significant (i.e. transcendental) and those which are not (i.e. those which are only empirically personal, and therefore irrelevant to the necessary conditions for knowledge). The fact that a scientist has to make numerous decisions in performing any experiment, for example, is certainly true. But for a good scientist such decisions will be irrelevant to the validity of the outcome (though of course, if he had not made them, he would not have discovered that particular objective fact). One obvious proof of this is that other scientists, with other personal decisions, hopes, fears, etc., should be able to reach the same conclusions as to the validity of the purported fact. (b) Once again, Polanyi is very right about tacit knowledge, etc. But he is wrong to think that such (empirically) personal elements have anything to do with constituting authentically scientific knowledge: they may indeed regulate how we perceive such knowledge, but they do not define what it must be--that can be done only by transcendental conditions. (c) For anyone familiar with Kant, it goes without saying that "the authentic examples of strict criteria for knowledge" ("PT" 50) are space, time and the twelve categories, united together by means of a transcendental synthesis of intuitions and concepts. (Incidentally, such criteria do not "relieve us from all responsibility for the holding of our beliefs" (PK 323, quoted in "PT" 52); rather, they merely enable us to view that responsibility from its proper perspective.)

3. Allen points out, quite rightly, that for Polanyi a phrase such as "personal meaning" is "almost a tautology" because "all knowing is personal, and is accomplished by the 'personal coefficient'" ("PT" 50). As a result Allen is unable to understand how the terms "objective meaning" or "impersonal meaning", as used in "KCP" 3, could make any

sense. First, we must remember that "KCP" is a Kantian critique of Polanyi, not a commentary on Polanyi's position. This then frees us to adopt Kant's distinctions, such as that between transcendental and empirical. Even though Kant's "transcendental conditions" are not the same as Polanyi's "personal coefficient", they do serve a similar function (viz. that of defining fundamental presuppositions). The key difference (aside from Polanyi's above-mentioned failure to distinguish between empirical and transcendental types of personal involvement) is that Polanyi refuses to admit that the epistemologically interesting fact about the "personal coefficient" is that it enables us to act as if it were not always present. That is, the personal aspect of our knowledge--in particular, our set of personal (cf. transcendental) presuppositions--is not always (and should not always be) the focus of our attention, nor is it always the key factor in what justifies us in regarding a given statement as true. Thus, when I imply in "KCP" 3 that the physicist's description of a grandfather's clock is "objective" in a way that, for example, an antique dealer's description might not be, I am not denying that the physicist's knowledge of the clock also has a "personal" element. Nor am I denying Polanyi's interesting point about the importance of levels (as Allen thinks I am--see the last paragraph of section 3 of "PT"). Rather, I am claiming that what the physicist does say about the clock (however inadequate it is for a complete description) will be true (or false) regardless of whether the clock was made by his own grandfather, whereas we might not be so sure about this in the case of the antique dealer. The physicist's knowledge of the clock obviously has a meaning--indeed, a very clear, mechanical meaning--but the meanings of the statements he makes about the clock are not validated or invalidated by the personal element which inevitably plays a part in the physicist's knowledge. Thus it can be said to have an "objective meaning" (in a non-Polanyian sense of the word). As I defined it in "KCP" 10, objectivity in this sense implies "true for everyone".

Allen defines "meaning" in "PT" 51 as something which is "by or for

consciousness of some sort". Unfortunately, he does not provide a corresponding definition of "personal"; rather, he seems to imply that the same phrase can define both words. If "personal" means "by or for consciousness", then obviously, there can be no impersonal knowledge, since knowledge is expressed in propositions, which are always intended for conscious use. Polanyi clearly has something like this in mind. I would reject it however, because of its misleading implications. Do we really want to say, for example, that logical truth is personal? That would imply (to anyone with little or no expertise in Polanyian thought) that a logical truth is valid because we believe it is valid. Now in one sense this is admittedly true. We believe (i.e. commit ourselves in an act of transcendental faith in the supposition) that certain fundamental principles, such as the laws of identity and noncontradiction, are true. There is nothing that forces us to accept them (except perhaps that we'd have a hard time thinking without doing so), so in this sense they are personal. Yet when we examine a particular logical truth, such as "All bachelors are unmarried", do we really want to claim that we accept the truth of this statement because of our own personal involvement with it? No. If we know what the words mean, then there is no need to go around interviewing as many bachelors as we can to see if they all turn out to be unmarried: we can be certain of its truth without taking into consideration anything else which could be called "personal" (i.e. anything besides our understanding of the words and our faith in logical structures). Such a statement therefore has an "objective meaning" because it is something which is "by or for a consciousness", and it has an "objective meaning" because its validity is in no way dependent on which consciousness it is presented to (assuming, of course, acceptance of the presuppositions--unconscious for most people--of logical systems as such).

4. Allen reminds us that Polanyi's use of the word "personal" is an attempt to overcome the illegitimate dichotomy between "objective" and "subjective", viewed as exclusive categories ("PT" 51; see also "KCP" 4, quoting PK 300), and asks whether or not I accept such a distinction. Yes and no. I certainly reject the validity of any attempt

to do away with these categories altogether by blurring them beyond any intelligible recognition. So in that sense I accept the categories. However, with Kant and Polanyi, I strongly disapprove of the belief that this categorization is exclusive. For Kant, empirical objectivity is defined in terms of its participation in transcendental subjectivity; the two are inextricably intertwined, and are both distinguished from transcendental objectivity (which is an impossible ideal) and empirical subjectivity (which is the merely contingent element in our experience). (Ironically, Allen himself employs a fairly exclusive subjective-objective dichotomy in "PT" 52!)

The word "objective" implies for Allen a kind of guarantee of truth. Thus he says in "PT" 51: "There is nothing that guarantees that we are correct in what we believe and judge and do." But I have argued above (and in "KCP") that this just isn't true! The thing that guarantees that the calculations we make on our hand calculator are correct, or that the particular marks on each exam paper are fair, or that this particular bachelor is unmarried, is our commitment to, or faith in, some higher-level principle. These principles, even though they often, or perhaps always, have a personal character, nevertheless define for us what we can in general regard as objectively true. Without adopting some view of this sort--as Polanyi and Allen insist we must not--I still (even after consulting the index to PK, as Allen suggests!) cannot find any convincing explanation (given the ambiguous ubiquity of Polanyi's understanding of the 'personal coefficient') for why Polanyi feels justified in rejecting alchemy and astrology with such brash confidence. The most I can see is that Polanyi has his own personal reasons; but how can these constrain anyone else to agree? This would not be problematic if it were not for the fact that Polanyi treats such matters as if every rational being should agree with such a rejection.

6. Allen excuses Polanyi's emphasis on natural science and empirical psychology and his consequent neglect of transcendental inquiries by claiming that "Polanyi was describing science from within, from within the commitment situation" ("PT" 52). Fair enough. But

in that case Polanyi should not have claimed (e.g. in the subtitle of PK) to be doing philosophy, and in particular, should not have claimed for his conclusions the kind of universal validity that only transcendental enquiry can establish. Allen goes on to assert that Polanyi "rightly" rejected "any attempt at transcendental critique", because "we cannot but start with acceptance of the facts established by science" ("PT" 53). Unfortunately, he never explains why this is true. Instead, he quotes a naive "standard objection to Kantian critique", namely, "that you cannot validate knowing without first knowing something of what you seek to validate" ("PT" 53)--a criticism which could only hold weight for someone who has not read (or at least, not understood) the first two paragraphs of the Introduction to Kant's first Critique!

Allen concludes section 6 with a statement which unwittingly backs up my charge in "KCP" that PK adopts a kind of "personal positivism". He insists that Polanyi would reject "any 'critical', 'justificatory' or 'foundational' ambition" ("PT" 53); yet Polanyi himself attempts to provide such a justification in the form of a "post-critical" (personal) foundation for knowledge--a predetermined prejudice not unlike the logical positivist's rejection of metaphysics by means of the (ironically, metaphysical) principle of verification!

7. By now I hope it is clear that by "objective knowledge" I do not mean "knowledge without personal involvement", as Allen assumes in "PT" 53. Nor do I mean "knowledge without any possibility of error" ("PT" 54). Rather, it is knowledge considered apart from that which our personal involvement supplies.

Allen complains ("PT" 54) about my charge in "KCP" 9, that Polanyi's "critique of doubt" ends up merely defending "a newfangled version of Cartesian doubt." Nevertheless, Allen himself ends up implicitly substantiating my point. I did not say Polanyi adopts the same type of doubt, but a new version--one which is in fact more radical in some respects. Allen supports this when he affirms that, for Polanyi, "we have just got to accept the fact that we could...be mistaken, and not allow this in general to

unsettle us." Yet it is unsettling to the philosopher to be told that nothing can be known for certain. Rather than passively and dogmatically doubting that certainty can ever be reached (a la Polanyi), Descartes adopted an active method of doubt as an attempt (though perhaps unsuccessful) to find something which is certain. By contrast, Kant's philosophy was, in part, an explicitly anti-Cartesian attempt to settle this quandary, without appealing to the dubious method of doubt.

8. I was rather surprised to find that Mr. Allen is unable to remember any of the occasions in PK in which Polanyi says that his ideas should be read as his own opinions; perhaps it is time he refreshed his memory by rereading PK. Of course, I fully agree that Polanyi's use of "I" is intended to be read as an "invitation to the reader to verify [Polanyi's personal position] in his own experience" ("PT" 54). Nevertheless, his usage still exemplifies his tendency to shy away from the universal in favour of the personal.

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