

Sanders' Analytic Rebuttal To Polanyi's Critics, With Some Musings On Polanyi's Idea Of Truth

Dale Cannon

ABSTRACT Key words: Polanyi, truth, correspondence theory of truth, relational theory of truth, post-critical, tacit knowledge, propositional knowledge, analytic philosophy.

*This article reviews **Michael Polanyi's Post-Critical Epistemology** by Andy F. Sanders but goes on to articulate certain crucial aspects of Polanyi's post-critical understanding of truth that seem to be overlooked in Sanders' account and which challenge conventional analyses of truth.*

Andy F. Sanders, *Michael Polanyi's Post-Critical Epistemology: A Reconstruction of Some Aspects of Tacit Knowing*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988. Pp. iv + 295. ISBN 90-5183-072-6. Special price for members of the Polanyi Society: \$25 (Rodopi, Atlanta GA 2015 South Park Place Atlanta GA 30339 tel 770-933-0027 fax 770-933-9644).

I. Overview

For some time, Polanyi's thought has needed patient exposition, reformulation, and defense in relation to mainstream Anglo-American epistemology, especially in the face of several serious criticisms and virtual dismissals that have gone unanswered. The way that mainstream has ignored Polanyi's thought is not simply due to its failure to read and interpret Polanyi's work carefully enough. It must be admitted that Polanyi's writing in certain places lends itself to being interpreted in subjectivist ways, especially when encountered out of context by the sensibility for precision and qualification nurtured in mainstream epistemology (or even by the sensibility of a philosophy teacher habituated to countering introductory students' unreadiness to give reasons for their opinions and their naive equation of truth with "truth for me"). Consider, for example, just two passages from *Personal Knowledge*: In one, Polanyi candidly characterizes as an "invitation to dogmatism" his own attempt "to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs" (*PK*, p. 268). In another, he *appears* to reduce truth, even factual truth, to simply belief, when he writes: ". . . [T]here is no difference, except in emphasis, between saying 'I believe *p*' or "'*p*' is true'. Both utterances emphatically put into words that I am confidently asserting *p*, as a fact." (*PK*, p. 316) Such statements, given few attempts by anyone to rebut criticisms of Polanyi (however misguided those criticisms happen to be) in mainstream philosophical venues and make clear how statements such as those just quoted do not entail subjectivism, have left the impression in some circles that there is little serious philosophy in Polanyi worth defending.

What is called for by philosophers sympathetic to Polanyi is, first, a solid acquaintance with and competence in what has been going on in mainstream epistemology within this century, second, a careful rearticulation and reformulation of Polanyi's argumentation in relation to the issues and analyses that have emerged within that mainstream, and third, a patient answer (by way of rebuttal or concession) to the significant criticisms of Polanyi's thought that have surfaced therein. In Andy Sanders' book (and person) we have all three. Not only does it accomplish each of these objectives quite well, it provides a good entree for understanding a number of the major issues, positions, and discussions of 20th century epistemology. It is very rich fare, much richer than my summary comments to follow

convey. My fear is that its regular price (\$60) combined with the relative obscurity of its publisher, as far as American philosophers are concerned, will keep it from becoming widely known among those who most need to hear its arguments. In any case, professional philosophers convinced of the importance of Polanyi's thought for contemporary epistemology need to read this book and take up the task where Sanders' book leaves off, following Sanders' model.

II. Synopsis

To be more specific, Sanders has undertaken to explain, reconstruct (in some cases), and defend those theses in Polanyi's epistemology which are most problematic to mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, and to point out significant correlations between Polanyi's ideas and those of other philosophers in that mainstream. Sanders is not unduly deferential to Polanyi, for there are many places where he points out obscurities, lack of development, ambiguities, weaknesses, insufficiently warranted (or possibly unwarranted) claims, and occasional contradictions, and where he does he usually goes on to reconstruct and reformulate a Polanyian insight so that it makes better sense. Sanders' Introduction makes explicit his intentions in these respects and presents a useful sketch Polanyi's life as a scientist and philosopher.

Polanyi's pioneering theory of tacit knowing is given a fine, systematic exposition in chapter 1, accompanied by solutions along the way to puzzles to which Polanyi's theory gives rise--such as the relation between tacit inference and explicit logical inference (by way of appeal to C. S. Peirce's account of *abduction*). In this chapter, Sanders rebuts criticisms voiced by Rom Harré (that tacit knowing in perception is qualitatively distinct from propositional knowing and that a theory of the former is inadequate to account for the logical structure of the latter) and by M. Bradie and H. A. Simon (that the *Meno* dilemma does not require tacit knowing for its solution, as Polanyi contends). A problem raised here, which continues as a theme throughout the book and is left incompletely resolved until chapter 6, is the philosophical legitimacy of "a thoroughly naturalized epistemology" such as Polanyi's that, by giving central place to the personal judgment of the knower, appears to confuse factual psychological considerations with normative logical considerations.

Chapter 2 undertakes "a rational reconstruction of Polanyi's doctrine of the tacit component" of assertions of fact. It is meant to serve as a basis for tackling the notion of (propositional) truth in chapter 3, which Sanders identifies as his own "main epistemological concern." Sanders' avowed objective is to establish that Polanyi's conception of the knower's ubiquitous personal participation in all acts of knowing and understanding does not imply subjectivism. In any case, chapters 2 and 3 are where the trappings of analytic philosophy are most evident, as Sanders makes use of symbolic logical formulae to minimize ambiguity and maximize clarity and focus. He starts off with a useful summary of Polanyi's overall philosophical programme as centered on a critique of objectivism. That summary culminates with this statement: ". . . his [Polanyi's] central objection to objectivism is that it fails to allow for 'the inherently personal character of the act by which truth is declared' (*PK:71*)." According to Sanders, Polanyi defines an "objectivist" theory of truth as one which "implies *the denial (or elimination) of the tacit component* [i.e., "the inherently personal character of the act"] *as a constituent part or factor in the making of any truth-claim.*" Given this focus, Sanders assumes as his primary responsibility a specification as fully and as undeniably as possible the tacit, personal component that objectivism leaves out of account. He draws on H. P. Grice's conception of "utterer's meaning," as distinct from sentence meaning and word meaning, John Searle's theory of illocutions (conventional types of action, distinct from propositional content, which are accomplished through the use of words--specifically, in this case, the action type of *assertion*), Anthony Kenny's conceptual analysis of emotion (specifically, the distinctions between emotions as

feelings and emotions as motives, and between the intentional object and the cause of an emotion), and Searle's theory of intentionality (which draws a parallel between the structure of speech acts and the structure of intentional states such as belief) to gather together and reconstruct in a single complex conception all that Polanyi has to say about the tacit component of assertions of fact: universal intent, heuristic desire, persuasive passion, feelings of satisfaction, and (sincere) belief.

Chapter 3 is devoted to a reconstruction (drawing on John Searle, Donald Davidson, D. A. Bell's exposition of G. Frege's thought, and Alfred Tarski, among others) of what Polanyi has to say about what we, as utterers, mean in saying that a factual statement is *true*. To set the stage, Sanders highlights Polanyi's thesis that any (sincere) articulate assertion is made up of two parts: (a) a sentence conveying its propositional content and (b) a tacit, mental act (of a definite person at a particular place and time) by which the sentence content is asserted (judged, affirmed, assented to, accepted, acknowledged, believed)--namely, the tacit component of which Sanders has given the analysis in chapter 2. In opposition to objectivist accounts of truth, Sanders reminds us, Polanyi seeks to reform our conception of truth to incorporate an acknowledgment of the ineradicable tacit, personal component of the act by which any truth is declared. Sanders takes Polanyi's primary conceptual innovation to be focused in Polanyi's proposal that "*true*" be "redefined . . . as expressing [but not constituting] the asseveration [i.e., the tacit component] of the declarative sentence to which it refers" (*PK*, p. 255). According to Sanders, Polanyi's proposed reformation is given in his claim (e.g., *PK*, p. 254) that *the predicative use of truth* (as in saying "*P* is true.") is equivalent (in utterer's meaning) to both (a) assertive utterances (in this case, simply *asserting "P."*--which Frege, Tarski, and many other philosophers in this century have held) and (b) first person present tense expressions of belief ("I believe that *P*.")--i.e., a three way equivalence. The difference between the three, as brought out by Sanders' analysis, amounts simply to a difference in degree of emphasis on specific features of the tacit component being expressed--e.g., universal intent or belief--and *not* in the propositional content being asserted. Sanders is careful to point out that, for Polanyi, the act of assertion, the personal judgment which has issued in the statement, and the belief that it expresses are not to be understood as any old assertion, judgment, or belief *de facto*, but always are to be understood in a normatively rational, *de jure* way, as responsible to truthful representation, as intending the achievement of truthful representation--hence as implicating or committing the asserter in certain specific ways. (The taken for granted background context for Polanyi's discussion of truth claims, Sanders reminds us, is a community of persons engaged in the quest for new knowledge and new truths.) Thus, first-person present-tense belief statements are for Polanyi to be construed as being issued with universal intent--though Sanders points out that this is somewhat problematic, e.g., when we report, as distinct from express, our belief. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to Sanders clarification and reconstruction of the equivalence stated above, which in a manner of speaking reduces the expressions "I believe (that)" and "is true" to devices for indicating assertions (see *PK*, pp. 28f and 255). I.e., in terms of utterer's meaning, they don't add to the meaning of the simply asserted "*P*" but serve a performative function (in J. L. Austin's and John Searle's sense) of reaffirming or reasserting *P*. Upon reconstruction, Sanders identifies this view as a special version of the so-called Non-descriptive or Performative Theory of Truth, which he shows can be reasonably upheld in the face of criticism (specifically in face of the criticisms of A. R. White that it fails to capture what the words "true" and "false" mean, as distinct from utterer's meaning).

Sanders' stated aim in chapter 4 is to demonstrate how Polanyi's account of "utterer's meaning of truth" (as reconstructed in chapter 3) is in basic accord with the commonsense intuition of truth as agreement with reality--and thus with Polanyi's claim to be a realist. Saunders makes use of A. A. Derkson's survey of realist arguments against instrumentalism to clarify and evaluate what critical remarks Polanyi makes of positivist instrumentalism on behalf of his (Polanyi's) view of science's quest to discover the hidden reality that underlies the facts of nature. Sanders here rebuts critics of Polanyi (Sheffler, Agassi, Musgrave, and Lakatos), who have contended that Polanyi is anything but

a realist. Making sense of Polanyi's realism entails clarifying Polanyi's peculiar conception of reality as "that which is expected to reveal itself indeterminately in the future"--which conception Sanders avers to be "one of the most difficult, complex and obscure parts of Polanyi's philosophy." Deferring to an analysis of Polanyi's notion of reality by Esther Meek (which turns out to be absent from his otherwise complete bibliography), Sanders narrows his focus to pinning down *the property of something being real* in terms of *fruitfulness* (p. 126). (However, rather than "real," it seems that Sanders is instead pinning down "truthlikeness," "verisimilitude," the quality of a theory perceived as "making contact with reality". There seems to be some equivocation or confusion here, perhaps stemming from Polanyi's relatively vague and loose language.) Sanders distinguishes two senses: *fruitfulness*₀--the sense of actually leading to new and interesting knowledge, and *fruitfulness*₁--having an indeterminate veridical quality by which *fruitfulness*₀ (i.e., hidden or as yet undisclosed aspects of reality) can be intuitively anticipated (i.e., tacitly but in crucial respects unspecified foreknown) before it occurs (i.e., before the new 'knowledge' can be specified and tested). (A typo at the bottom of p. 126 unfortunately confuses the latter with the former.) Polanyi speaks of the latter's recognition in terms of *intellectual beauty* (also "harmony," "coherence," "depth," and "lasting shapes [*Gestalten*] as tokens of reality"), as distinct from formal elegance (which distinction, Sanders points out, is never fully clarified), for which no strict criteria can be formulated. In an attempt to clarify *fruitfulness*₁ and apprehension of intellectual beauty, Sanders compares Polanyi's realist philosophy of science with that of critical rationalist Imre Lakatos. Lakatos has insightfully contrasted his own view of the appraisal of scientific theories from Polanyi's view in terms of the difference between statute law and case law. The former believes that there are specifiable, universal criteria at work, whereas the latter holds that what criteria are involved cannot be abstracted from consideration of relevant individual cases and the competent judgment of scientists themselves. Whereas Lakatos is at points highly critical of Polanyi (and of the elitism Polanyi's views seem to presuppose)--though inconsistently so, as Sanders points out--Sanders demonstrates that the two are not nearly so divergent as first appears. Thus, for Polanyi (and at times for Lakatos) *fruitfulness*₁ or intellectual beauty as a token of reality, at least in science, turns out to be identifiable (i.e., *fallibly* recognized) only by way of the personal judgment of competent members of the scientific community. It does not itself make something (e.g., a theory) true; as truthlikeness, verisimilitude, a token or mark of what is true, it intimates the discovery of what is true; it is a kind of evidence (though ultimately unspecified, intuitive, and tacit) of truth. It follows that it is wholly compatible with Sanders' analytic reconstruction of Polanyi's account of truth developed in chapter 3, which has to do with explicit assertions of fact. In the last section of chapter 4, Sanders sets out to realize his stated aim for the chapter, namely to show how the notion of truthlikeness being discussed implies the commonsense notion of correspondence with reality or fact. Unfortunately, he confuses this relatively straightforward *epistemological* question of the correspondence relation between the propositional content of a representation of reality (e.g., as found in an assertion or belief-that) and the state of affairs (reality) it purports to represent (with which relation Polanyi completely agrees) with the *ontological* question of the correspondence between the structure of tacit comprehension (which need not immediately involve any proposition as such) and the structure of the comprehensive entity which is its object. Nevertheless, Sanders does make some interesting points about the latter, showing Polanyi's understanding of it to consist in a relationship of homomorphy rather than isomorphy, in rebuttal to the accounts of R. E. Innis, J. B. Bennett, and E. L. Meek.

In chapters 5 and 6, Sanders takes on the most serious and sustained critique of Polanyi's epistemology from the Popperian school of philosophy of science, that of Alan Musgrave. In his 1969 doctoral dissertation at the University of London, Musgrave accuses Polanyi of subjectivism, solipsism, dogmatism, relativism, and psychologism (confusing matters of logical validity with matters of psychological fact). Sanders patiently proceeds one by one to acknowledge the partial truth on which each of these charges is based and to concede the justice of some critical points,

but shows how each charge ultimately falls far short of Polanyi's actual position, which in turn provides a crucial corrective to Popper's position. In support of his argument he draws on Searle's idea that behind and undergirding each particular intentional state (such as a speech act) is a "Network of Intentional States" and a "Background of pre-intentional stances and mental capacities" (which he uses to further specify what is involved in Polanyi's conception of the tacit coefficient to all focal awareness and explicit judgment) and Susan Haack's substantial critique of Critical Rationalism's rigid separation of matters of logic from matters of psychology and its resulting attempt to eliminate from accounts of scientific knowledge reference to a knowing subject. Along the way Sanders puts forward many points, including an interesting distinction between dogmatic justificationism (assuming one's first principles to be self-evident and incorrigible) and methodological dogmatism (tenaciously sticking to one's fallible convictions as long as it is reasonably possible). Significantly, Sanders brings out how Popper's and Polanyi's epistemologies of science, despite the obvious differences and these two philosopher's inability to appreciate each other, at bottom turn out to have considerably more in common than is usually realized and that their respective positions, with certain crucial qualifications, may ultimately be reconcilable.

Chapter 7 is devoted to clarifying Polanyi's extension of the theory of personal knowledge beyond the natural sciences to the humanities and to religion in particular, and how it contributes to a post-critical vision of the world as fundamentally meaningful. Sanders is particularly interested in bringing out the implications of Polanyi's thinking for conceiving religion as a fiduciary framework (analogous to that of modern natural science) and worship as a heuristic vision (of a meaningful and hopeful universe), and for certain other problems in philosophy of religion. Compared to earlier chapters, this chapter is the most open-ended, with promising threads of ideas and arguments leading off in many directions but left dangling, primarily because Polanyi left them undeveloped and in some respects not fully consistent. I had expected more of a climax than it provided.

III. Going Beyond Sanders' Account

Despite my profound appreciation for all that Sanders has accomplished in this book, I am left with some misgivings. Most relate directly or indirectly to Polanyi's aim to effect a shift in his reader from a critical to a post-critical intellectual sensibility (reflected in the subtitle of *PK: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* and dealt with explicitly in Part Three of *PK*), concerning which at no point in Sanders' book am I left with a clear idea or a keen appreciation, despite its inclusion in the title, *Michael Polanyi's Post-Critical Epistemology*.

Sanders leaves his reader's critical intellectual sensibility intact and unchallenged, as if Polanyi's argument entailed no radical criticism of this sensibility and posture. By the reader's critical intellectual sensibility, I mean first of all the habitual tendency tacitly to assume the posture of an anonymous, detached (in the third person), noncommittal, skeptical assessor of propositions regarding matters of knowledge, truth, and reality, which are to be doubted unless one is given sufficient reason for believing them. (The propriety of which posture, of course, is wholly taken for granted in the analytic tradition in which Sanders' book is couched.) If, as Polanyi contends, truth can be thought of only by believing it, then such a posture is incapable of truly thinking truth, its protestations notwithstanding. The problem Polanyi is most deeply and most perplexingly struggling with in Part Three of *PK* with regard to what he speaks of as "the language of commitment" (which Sanders seems uncomfortable with, though he ventures a defense of it) is *the devising of a post-critical rhetoric for epistemology*. Whether we adopt that language ourselves or something else, Polanyi's insights require that epistemological rhetoric, our very way of doing epistemology, be changed. Things cannot simply go on as they have in the past. Yet Sanders (see, e.g., pp. 167-168) appears to proceed as if differentiating

“in neutral terms” the content of Polanyi’s ideas from his rhetoric and style were entirely unproblematic.

The matter at issue here is not simply rhetoric as some relatively superficial matter, such as how we should express our thoughts. The critical intellectual posture being challenged by Polanyi in part hinges on the assumption that (in principle) one can unproblematically and neutrally specify a *propositional content* of any thought or intention which is then subject to critical reflection (an assumption taken for granted by Searle’s proposed parallel between internal intentional states and external speech acts, which Sanders readily adopts [pp. 61f, 75f]). (Note the requirement that the critical tradition would lay upon us: because everything must be subject to critical reflection in the modern cartesian mode, *everything* is to be construed as a propositional content, or at least unproblematically determinable as such.) Polanyi repeatedly makes the point that we can critically reflect only on something explicitly stated or articulated (e.g., a propositional content or some symbolic representation), but that tacit awareness is not itself subject to critical reflection precisely because it is not representational (hence not propositional). It is an *enacted relationship* in which the knower connects with the known, a *contact with reality*, an *indwelling of the known*. As such, it does not have propositional content--which is not to say that it might not issue forth in, or in part be represented by, some propositional content, or be itself a making sense of and an upholding of some propositional content. To assume that tacit awareness as such has propositional content would be to assume that it is latently or potentially explicit, i.e., already representational. The modern critical tradition takes explicitation /determination /articulation /thematization of the world (its determinate representability) for granted; Polanyi and post-critical philosophy do not. Explicit or articulate knowing is a knowing by representation (*wissen, savoir*) possessable in the absence of what is known. Tacit knowing is a knowing by first person acquaintance (*kennen, connaitre*) possessable only by way of a presence to and a rapport with what is known. Tacit knowing is that upon which our explicit accounts (and thus all instances of explicit knowing) are developed, based, deciphered, and assessed.

Parallel to Polanyi’s distinction between tacit awareness and explicit knowledge is his distinction (observed by Polanyi but rarely remarked) between two kinds of believing: believing *in* (including trust, endorsement, accreditation, reliance, etc., all of which are for Polanyi *a-critical*) and believing *that* or believing *about* (which may be *critical* or *uncritical*). (See *PK*, p. 264.) Neither distinction is absolute; the latter of each pair is rooted and grounded in the former. Believing *in* is more fundamental and foundational than believing *that*. The distinction between believing *in* and believing *that* for the most part gets lost in Sanders’ account of belief, and by default all forms of belief tend to be reduced to believing *that*. In any case, the kind of methodological believing requisite for approaching truth is more fundamentally the former than it is the latter: again, believing *in* is an enacted, developing relationship. It cannot, without distortion, be reduced to assent to a propositional content (believing *that*). Understanding the distinction between believing *in* and believing *that* is crucial for making sense of Polanyi’s remarks about theories and larger fiduciary frameworks as instruments of our knowing, extensions of our bodies, which we indwell and assimilate to ourselves in reaching out to *make contact with* aspects of reality otherwise unknown. Any scientific theory will indeed for a time and in certain circumstances be considered critically, as subject to critically entertained belief *that*. But in shifting our attention from this *focal attention* to the theory, once we have come to recognize it as true, to *subsidiarily attending from* the theory to aspects of reality to which it provides us clues, we come *a-critically* to rely upon the theory (to believe *in* it) so as to put us in contact with (in a direct, though mediated, acquaintance relationship with) those aspects of reality. The believing is importantly different in each case, even though the same theory is involved. But in the latter case, it is the theory as subsidiarily known (indeed, subsidiarily known by the competent scientist), disclosing aspects (clues to hidden reality) to which we are oblivious in attending to the theory focally as an explicit

content (as candidate for belief *that*). Those clue-like aspects of the theory are not (or at least not directly) a matter of explicit logical inference from the propositional content of the theory; they only come into play as we look not at the theory but toward that to which the theory points as we place our confidence in it, assimilating it to ourselves, extending our reach by its means. Thereby the theory functions in a mediational capacity (mediating our reach) rather than a representational capacity (picturing in the absence). Believing *in* here again is a relationship, a reaching out to make contact with hidden reality (a reality which of course is also meaning and value). Construing this believing *in* as simply assent to the theory's propositional content completely obscures this relational connection with reality which Polanyi brings to light.

For Polanyi, believing (*qua* believing *in*) as well as knowing (*qua* tacit knowing) are more fundamentally relational than representational. In consequence, "universal intent" is less a matter of "the intention to make only true factual statements" (to which Sanders seems to reduce it--see pp. 81, 67f) than it is the intention to connect with a reality recognizable in common to responsible inquirers, i.e., the intention to attain *truth*. Truth, for Polanyi, is thus more than propositional truth (on which Sanders almost entirely focuses his account); it is *the achievement of connection in the first person (for oneself) with, or rapport with, objective reality (qua recognizable in common to responsible inquirers), a fidelity to it that adheres to it, acknowledges it, and makes it known, appearances and others' unbelief to the contrary notwithstanding*. In that sense it is an impassioned transcendental ideal, summoning us to responsibility and transcendence. The Hungarian Revolution, which Polanyi praises so much, was fought for the freedom to pursue and attain truth in this sense, to come into rapport for oneself with what is real, not simply "to make only true factual statements." Of course, propositional truth was for the Hungarian Freedom Fighters as well as for Polanyi, a genuine and important concern; yet it was for them, as it should be for us, subordinate to truth in this deeper sense, a sense that by summoning us to transcendence is constitutive of our personhood (as something more than subjectivity).

I must hasten to add that this deeper, existential sense of truth is not absent from Sanders' account. He makes explicit reference to it on several occasions (e.g., pp. 52f, 148f). But its relationship to Sanders' central emphasis upon propositional truth is never made clear. Nor, in consequence, is Polanyi's radical challenge to the failure of 20th century mainstream philosophy to grant this sense of truth the recognition it deserves made clear.

Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick, Montana State University, Billings, MT 59101 (fax: 406-657-2037). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins, Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507 (fax: 816-271-5987 e-mail: mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu). Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use M.L.A. or A.P.A. style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered. Manuscripts should include the author's name on a separate page since submissions normally will be sent out for blind review. In addition to the typescript of a manuscript to be reviewed, authors are expected to provide an electronic copy of accepted articles; it is helpful if original submissions are accompanied by an electronic copy.