CHAPTER FOUR

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME?
PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE AND HERMENEUTICS

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Why Gadamer and Polanyi?

It is an interesting accident of history that in the space of a couple of years in the mid 20th century, two of the most significant critiques of the Enlightenment dream of certain knowledge and detached objectivity were published. Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* was published in 1958 and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* in 1960. Yet, apparently, neither author was notably influenced by the other.

This is not the place to justify the choice of these two authors as profoundly significant figures. In hermeneutic circles the choice of Gadamer can pass without justification: he is recognised as the towering figure of 20th century philosophical hermeneutics. Building on the work of Heidegger, among others, he produced a manifesto on understanding in the human sciences that remains the ground of hermeneutic theory today. Meanwhile, in the philosophy of science Polanyi does not command the same overriding respect—although I believe he should do so. This paper explores parallels between Polanyi’s personal knowledge and Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and is based on my conviction that they are saying similar things, albeit in different languages.

While protesting against objectivism and the notion that knowledge or understanding are the outcome of a detached objective method, both Polanyi and Gadamer also rejected subjectivist and relativist implications of their work. For present purposes I am taking objectivism to describe the view which holds that epistemic outcomes are, at least ideally, independent of the knower. They are not constituted—they are simply uncovered. And in so far as these outcomes are tainted by human agency, objectivism
holds this to be an unfortunate muddying of the waters, which should be kept to a minimum. Subjectivism on the other hand, I take as that view that sees this human clutter as inevitable and overwhelming, to the point that while the truth may be “out there” it is unknowable across the gap between knowing subject and the external object of knowledge.

Both of these extremes accept a Cartesian model of knowledge but with, respectively, optimistic or pessimistic attitudes about its possible success. What makes Polanyi and Gadamer alike and radical is not that they simply reject the two extremes of this spectrum—rather, they reject the entire paradigm of knowledge implied in such descriptions. Both offer another paradigm of human knowing that sees the subjective and objective not as competing poles, but as mutually reinforcing characteristics of knowledge; and, they hold, without such a perspective there can be no knowledge. In Polanyian terms, natural science and hermeneutics both result in personal knowledge consisting of truth claims made with universal intent. That is, their claims are humanly constituted but are also held with a conviction that maintains they are not just “true for me” but in some sense are universally true, for all people.

The work of both authors was also universal in another way. Gadamer’s hermeneutics, focusing on the human sciences, was an analysis of the universal problem of human understanding; and while Polanyi focused initially on knowledge of the natural sciences he soon found himself working towards a universal epistemology, or, in his own words, “an alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally” (1958, vii).

**The Search: A Coming to Truth—Beyond Objectivism and Subjectivism**

As I have already hinted, the first thing that unites these thinkers is the nature of their pursuit. Both Gadamer and Polanyi are anti-objectivist believers in the truth. In their respective fields, both are driven to justify their conviction that it is possible to talk of truth without falling into the Enlightenment trap that binds truth to certainty and detached objectivity. In the sense that both reject the possibility of an Archimedean standpoint which is unmediated by tradition and unaffected by personal beliefs, they are anti-objectivist. But both stand against relativism and extreme subjectivism by holding that, while certainty is a chimera, we nevertheless can talk of truth and make universal truth claims.

In line with the hermeneutic tradition, Gadamer’s is a search for understanding, though the title of his *magnum opus* makes it clear that it is truth or true understanding that he seeks. While he is against objectivist inter-
pretations, he would also not be satisfied with a merely subjectivist inter-
preter-response approach to art or texts or history. He believes that texts
can validly “claim to be saying something true.” In criticising a historicist
reading of a text, for example, Gadamer says, “The text that is understood
historically is forced to abandon its claim to be saying something true.”
But, he says, when we read such a text in this way, “…we have given up
the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for our-
selves” (1989, 303; italics mine).

Meanwhile, Polanyi is keen to use the word knowledge, but he does so
in the radically qualified sense of personal knowledge, defined most ex-
pansively in his magnum opus of that title. For Polanyi, personal knowl-
dge is knowledge “that claims to have made contact with reality: a reality
which, being real, may yet reveal itself to future eyes in an indefinite range
of unexpected manifestations” (1967, 24).

So, scientific discovery in Polanyi’s terms or coming to understanding
in Gadamer’s terms, is to arrive at truth. However, such knowledge cannot
be adequately theorised using a model that separates a knowing and im-
personal subject from the object of knowledge, and which imagines that
there are methodical guarantees of success. In summary then, for both
authors truth is to be had, though not by accepting the Enlightenment pa-
radigm.

A Significant Difference:
The Differing Objects of Investigation

Before moving on to other similarities between Gadamer’s and Po-
lanyi’s approaches to their respective objects of investigation, it is appro-
priate to comment on the obvious difference between these authors. Po-
lanyi, once one of the world’s leading physical chemists, is principally
interested in the knowledge that comes from the natural sciences, the ob-
ject of which is the material world, its functioning and its laws. In particu-
lar, Polanyi is interested in the process of scientific discovery. Gadamer’s
project, on the other hand, is about human understanding, the object of
which ranges from history and texts to art and music.

My own interest in these authors was sparked because while the ob-
jects of their work are distinct, I believe that their approach is similar. In
fact, I think they are describing remarkably comparable processes that lead
to knowledge of both sorts of objects. To put it another way, I am talking
of the grounds or justification for their knowledge claims—and not about
the fruits of such claims. I’m concerned with the means of coming to
know, despite the different nature of the objects known.
The Nature of Knowledge: Personal Knowledge with Universal Intent

While they use different language, there is a marked correspondence in the way Gadamer and Polanyi describe what we might cautiously call the epistemic products of hermeneutics and of the natural sciences, respectively. We have already seen that both authors recognise the two poles of interpreter and meaning, but they reject the inadequate descriptions implied by either subjectivism or objectivism. Gadamer’s hermeneutics aims at true understanding while the outcome of the epistemic search for Polanyi is personal knowledge.

For Gadamer, true understanding is neither subjective nor objective; nor can it ever be final. It is not merely subjective because it is in some sense true. “Meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way” he says. And he talks of the danger of failing “to hear what the other person is really saying” or of “ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text…” “The important thing,” he says, “is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings” (1989, 268-9).

Now listen to Polanyi, who, although he uses the term “objective”, does so in a strictly limited sense. He says:

Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality: … It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge: … By trying to say something that is true about a reality believed to be existing independently of our knowing it, all assertions of fact necessarily carry universal intent. Our claim to speak of reality serves thus as the external anchoring of our commitment in making a factual statement. (1958, vii-viii, 311)

For both authors, knowledge is not certain—it is provisional, both in the sense that it is always in the making and also in the sense that the interpreter might simply be wrong. Whether we are referring to Newton and Einstein or Romeo and Juliet, some interpretations are simply better than others. Yet conviction—not certainty—is the appropriate description of

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1 My italics.
2 Polanyi's italics.
beliefs that are no longer seen to lie on a spectrum between certainty and uncertainty.

**The Limits of Method and the Attitude of Intellectual Humility**

While neither Gadamer nor Polanyi are against method, they both elaborate their theories in conscious opposition to an Enlightenment confidence in method as a guarantee of truth. They recognise the inevitably partial nature of human exploration of truth, and both display humility that challenges naïve Enlightenment optimism and mastery, which in its positivist extremes claims that all that cannot be mastered is meaningless.

Polanyi highlights the impossibility of formalising the rules of scientific discovery, and emphasises the personal agency, commitment and creativity of the scientist. He says, for example:

> Desisting henceforth from the vain pursuit of a formalized scientific method, commitment accepts in its place the person of the scientist as the agent responsible for conducting and accrediting scientific discoveries. The scientist’s procedure is of course methodical. But his methods are but the maxims of an art which he applies in his own original way to the problem of his own choice. (1958, 311)

And, for his part, while Gadamer is happy to talk loosely of procedure (“… a procedure that we in fact exercise whenever we understand anything.” 1989, 267) and of “methodologically conscious understanding” (1989, 269), like Polanyi he is firmly against trusting in method to lead to truth. Gadamer refers to the task of hermeneutics in the following terms:

> Ultimately, it has always been known that the possibilities of rational proof and instruction do not fully exhaust the sphere of knowledge. … We… must laboriously make our way back into this tradition by first showing the difficulties that result from the application of the modern concept of method to the human sciences. Let us therefore consider how this tradition became so impoverished and how the human sciences’ claim to know something true came to be measured by a standard foreign to it—namely the methodical thinking of modern science (1989, 23-4).

**The Question: How Do We Arrive at Truth?**

Arising from the inability of method to guarantee truth, is the similar concern of both thinkers: Both dedicate themselves to the task of articulat-
ing a description of the actual practice of human understanding or knowledge production. They do so by focusing on an explication of that which is neither certain nor final knowledge. And both see themselves as attempting an escape from what Gadamer calls the “entanglement in traditional epistemology” (1989, 276).

Polanyi says that the implications of his analysis go “far beyond the domain of science”, as he aims “to establish [his] alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally” (1958, vii). For him, the purpose of his work is “...to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false” (1958, 214) and “...to enter avenues of legitimate access to reality from which objectivism debars us...” (1958, 292).

For Gadamer, the project is predicated on the fact that all thinking is done in the context of mostly unconscious prejudices or prejudgments. If such prejudgments are an essential part of the understanding process, and if the hope of objectivity or final knowledge are in fact blind alleys, then what he calls the “fundamental epistemological question” (1989, 277) concerns the legitimacy of prejudgments.

Yet this cryptic reference to prejudgments needs explanation—and it leads to the heart of the issue.

**Unarticulated Starting Points:**

**Tradition, Authority and Prejudice**

I have explained that both Polanyi and Gadamer reject the possibility of an Archimedean vantage point from which to observe the world unfettered by prejudice or presuppositions. The Cartesian dream of finding certainty by casting aside all dubitable presuppositions has been thoroughly debunked in the last century, and for those who accept this model of knowledge the end point is often some form of subjectivism or relativism. But it is writers such as Gadamer and Polanyi, in their respective fields, who by working within a totally distinct paradigm, justify holding on to the baby of truth as they throw out the bath water of Cartesian rationalism.

So where does their genius lie? Both of these authors highlight not only the inevitability but also the necessity of all thinking being entrenched in history and tradition, and depending on authority and prejudgments. Instead of entering the regressive cycle of fighting the phantoms of pre-critical belief, they recognise and embrace them as allies to be co-opted in the search for truth.
For Gadamer, the search for understanding is couched in terms of the ubiquitous nature of our prejudgments or prejudices (the word is the same in German). According to Gadamer, the prejudice against prejudice was the downfall of Enlightenment epistemology, and, in contrast, hermeneutics is based on the doctrine that prejudgments are an essential precondition to understanding. In an oft-quoted passage he says:

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. … The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudgments of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being. (1989, 276-77)\(^3\)

Out of this awareness arises what Gadamer calls “the fundamental epistemological question” for hermeneutics, alluded to earlier. The question is, according to Gadamer: “What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others, which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?” (1989, 277)

Polanyi, too, is in no doubt about the naiveté of a program of Cartesian doubt that aims to eliminate preconceived opinions (1958, 295). He says:

While we can reduce the sum of our conscious acceptances to varying degrees, and even to nil, by reducing ourselves to a state of stupor, any given range of awareness seems to involve a correspondingly extensive set of a-critically accepted beliefs. (1958, 296-7)

While Gadamer’s discussion is in terms of the role of prejudice and of tradition, the conceptual link with Polanyi becomes clearer when Gadamer talks of the sort of authority that can be a valid source of truth. He says:

…authority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned… It rests on acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others. … The prejudgments that [the teacher, the superior, the expert] implant are legitimized by the person who presents them. But in this way they become prejudgments not just in favor of a person but a content, since they effect the same disposition to believe something that can be brought about in other ways—e.g. by good reasons. (1989, 279-80)

\(^3\) Italics are Gadamer’s. In this quotation and in various places I have changed the translator’s “prejudice” to “prejudgment” which equally represents the original German Vorurteil.
Now listen to Polanyi talking about authority and tradition in science:

… the knowledge comprised by science is not known to any single person. Indeed, nobody knows more than a tiny fragment of science well enough to judge its validity and value at first hand. For the rest he has to rely on views accepted at second hand on the authority of a community of people accredited as scientists. (1958, 163)

Not only does all thinking arise in the context of prejudgments or tradition and the acceptance of authorities—all shared interpretation or discussion is, in addition, “history in the making”. For Gadamer, this is the double-edged sword of what he calls Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewuβtsein, normally translated as historically effected consciousness. This is the double awareness that recognises, on one hand, that our very thinking is historically effected and, on the other hand, that our actual interpretations inevitably contribute to form part of that history itself (1989, 299-301).

Polanyi also recognises something similar, when in the context of a discussion of authority, he says that when we submit to authority or even react against the prevailing consensus we also modify the balance of that consensus (1958, 208-9).

**Commitment, Responsibility and Fiduciary Assent**

One implication of the necessity to work from prejudgments or acritically accepted beliefs is the commitment implied in holding such beliefs. Both Gadamer and Polanyi highlight the personal involvement and commitment of the knower or interpreter in the act of interpreting the world or the data before them.

Polanyi talks of the “fiduciary rootedness of all rationality” (1958, 297) and says that “the attribution of truth to any particular, stable [view of the universe] is a fiduciary act which cannot be analysed in non-committal terms” (1958, 294). For him, “… the act of knowing includes an appraisal; and this personal coefficient, which shapes all factual knowledge, bridges in doing so the disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity” (1958, 17).

So Polanyi speaks of the scientist as one who has decided what to believe, yet not arbitrarily, because:

…he arrived at his conclusions by the utmost exercise of responsibility. He has reached responsible beliefs, born of necessity, and not changeable at will. … To accept commitment as the only relation in which we can be-
lieve something to be true is to abandon all efforts to find strict criteria of truth and strict procedures for arriving at the truth. A result obtained by applying strict rules mechanically, without committing anyone personally, can mean nothing to anybody. (1958, 311)

And in a paragraph that could almost have been lifted from a tome on hermeneutics, Polanyi says:

… into every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and … this coefficient is no mere imperfection, but a necessary component of all knowledge. (1958, 312)

In my reading of Gadamer so far, while there is a paucity of explicit reference to commitment, the element of personal involvement and commitment in interpretation is obvious, and it seems that Polanyi’s view is consonant with and possibly implied by Gadamer’s hermeneutics. One explicit comment of Gadamer’s is to be found at the start of Truth and Method, where he makes reference to “the ‘scientific’ integrity of acknowledging the commitment involved in all understanding” (1989, xxviii).

**Tacit Knowledge**

We have seen that, for Gadamer, understanding is entrenched in and presupposes a host of unexamined assumptions or beliefs. We ride a bicycle or read Dostoevsky without a self-conscious attempt to make our presuppositions explicit. The object of our understanding is tacitly intelligible to us, and understanding is precisely this tacit ability to make sense of the world. For Gadamer, it is not something mastered by method or rules but is acquired in practice as we listen and trust that others are doing the same.

Those who know Polanyi will have noticed my deliberate use of the word “tacit” to describe Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Much of Polanyi’s work is based on his discussion of tacit knowledge summed up in his catch phrase, “we know more than we can tell.” Polanyi goes to great lengths to show that such knowledge is ubiquitous and has radical implications for epistemology. He says:

...suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge. The ideal of exact science
would turn out to be fundamentally misleading and possibly a source of devastating fallacies.” (1967, 20; my italics)

Let me comment briefly on two more examples of the role of tacit knowledge found in both authors. The first is the tacit anticipation of a meaning that has not yet been understood but that leads to further investigation; the second is that of the circle or widening spiral of meaning driven by this anticipation, which is the more common sense of the term “hermeneutic circle”.

Recognising Meaning: The Anticipation of As Yet Undiscovered Truth

Both Polanyi and Gadamer highlight how understanding or discovery is prefaced and driven by a tacit intimation and conviction of an as—yet—undiscovered truth. Polanyi highlights this in the context of anticipating a solution to a problem when he says:

…to see a problem is to see something that is hidden. It is to have an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars. The problem is good if this intimation is true; it is original if no one else can see the possibilities of the comprehension that we are anticipating. (1967, 21-22)

And elsewhere, describing the personal conviction involved, he says:

The enquiring scientist’s intimations of a hidden reality are personal. They are his own beliefs, which—owing to his originality—as yet he alone holds. Yet they are not a subjective state of mind, but convictions held with universal intent, and heavy with arduous projects. (1958, 311)

Meanwhile Gadamer talks of this anticipated comprehension which “governs our understanding of a text” (1989, 293), in the following terms:

The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole. … The fore-conception of completeness that guides all our understanding is, then, always determined by the specific content. Not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said. (1989, 291, 294)
The Hermeneutic Circle

This anticipation of meaning leads to one sense of the hermeneutic circle where meaning is produced in the interplay between the interpreter and that which is interpreted. Again, in the context of textual interpretation Gadamer says:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. … Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves, is the constant task of understanding. (1989, 267)

While I cannot recall that Polanyi talks explicitly about such a circle, a parallel to be pursued can be found in his discussion of focal and subsidiary awareness and the need to focus on the whole while indwelling the particulars in order to arrive at meaning.

For Further Exploration

Let me finish with some brief clues about avenues for further exploration of the relationship between these thinkers.

We could examine the relationship between Gadamer’s concept of the two horizons and Polanyi’s outline of the role of the proximal and distal poles of the knowing relationship. The following quotation is from Gadamer, but it could almost as well have been written by Polanyi. Gadamer says: “To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion” (1989, 305).

We could also explore the way both authors understand the role of language as a type or model for both Gadamer’s understanding and Polanyi’s personal knowledge. “Language is language … when it is absorbed into making what is said visible, and has itself disappeared, as it were” (Gadamer, 1976, 126).

We could also examine what we might call the tests for knowledge in both cases. If methodical proofs are not possible in either the human or natural sciences, then it is characteristics such as abundant outcomes, and the way truth has of revealing still more unexpected possibilities, that come into play. And what of taste as a test for truth: the taste of the artist, the connoisseur, or the experienced scientist, a factor that once again relies
on tacit judgement to label one thing true or meaningful and another as spurious? To quote Gadamer again, “The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed” (1989, 291).

Finally, it would be productive to return to something I alluded to at the beginning of this paper and tease out the various senses in which both Polanyi and Gadamer make universal claims for their work.

However, all of this will have to wait ...

**Conclusion**

So where have we come to in this very brief comparison? My hope is that I have been able to convince you of a remarkable confluence of ideas between these two descriptions of what are generally accepted as two separate realms of human endeavour. If I am right, then, when following the trajectory of both Gadamerian and Polanyian thinking, one can argue that there is no divide between the way we arrive at knowledge in the natural sciences and the way we come to understanding in the human sciences; and, in Polanyian phraseology, the product of both is personal knowledge held with universal intent.

**Bibliography**


