

## Polanyi Scholarship and the Former Baylor Polanyi Center

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In October 1999, William A. Dembski, a leading “intelligent design theory” (ID) proponent, established the Michael Polanyi Center, an ID think tank, at Baylor University. After months of controversy, an external review committee recommended that the center’s ID research be conducted under the auspices of Baylor’s Institute for Faith and Learning. Correctly noting that Polanyi himself would not have endorsed ID, the committee also recommended that Polanyi’s name not be associated with such research. Shortly after the committee issued its October 2000 report, Dembski’s conduct resulted in his being relieved of his duties as director of the center.

The external review committee’s recommendation was consistent with a significant fact: the Baylor Polanyi Center was not well grounded in the thought of Michael Polanyi. If Dembski had good grounds for naming a center about “intelligent design” after Polanyi, these grounds were not made public in the forum of Polanyi scholarship.

Michael Polanyi was a daring polymath who had careers in medicine, physical chemistry, economics and social thought, and finally philosophy. His social and philosophical thought was complex and did not reflect standard guild discourse. Many of his terms, such as “personal” and “objective,” do not follow common philosophical usage. In fact, he contended that the most exact scientific knowledge is personal knowledge. Polanyi’s proposal of a new theory for understanding scientific knowledge and all knowledge is based on an examination of major ways of knowing in mathematics, physical science, biological science, social science, literature, the arts, and religion. What he found is that all types of knowledge are based on a common structure. We have to participate bodily in the objective knowledge that we achieve. The ideal of strict impersonal detachment in knowing is mistaken. To explain this “personal knowledge” he developed a structure called “tacit knowing” which shows how we rely on and use our personhood to make contact with reality. This theory is stated in his 92–page book, *The Tacit Dimension* (Doubleday, 1966).

Polanyi’s view was a major reorientation in philosophical terminology and thinking that he called “a post-critical philosophy.” Although he avoided the pitfalls of subjectivism by remaining committed to the western understanding of the universal intent of truth, the distinctiveness of Polanyi’s outlook requires that one read him carefully in a context that does not assume many of the ordinary meanings of a culture deeply shaped by the ideal of strict scientific detachment and impersonal knowledge.

Polanyi’s proposal of a “post-critical philosophy” has attracted several hundred scholars who began an organization in 1972 after a conference with Polanyi at Dayton University. The group settled on “The Polanyi Society” as its name. The society has a periodical, *Tradition & Discovery*, a website – [www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/](http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/), annual meetings, and special conferences. Society members have written over 125 dissertations as well as books and hundreds of articles, all on Polanyi’s thought. Further, there is a corresponding alliance of the US Polanyi Society with two other Polanyi groups. One is the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association in Hungary and its journal *Polanyiana*. The other is the Society for Post-critical and

Personalist Studies in Great Britain and its journal *Appraisal*. In short, after over thirty years of scholarship on Polanyi by scholars across the academic disciplines, there is now a network that reaches around the world and is especially concentrated in science, philosophy and religion.

This body of scholarship justifies asking why the Baylor center proponents took the name of Michael Polanyi and used it for promoting “intelligent design.” Years of Polanyi scholarship does not demonstrate theistic teleology or “intelligent design” as a goal in Polanyi’s work. Associating the name of Michael Polanyi with the Baylor center was therefore illegitimate on several grounds. First, the use of Polanyi’s name was not endorsed by Michael Polanyi’s literary executor and son, Nobel Laureate John Polanyi. Second, the center did not pursue the work of Michael Polanyi. At its grand inaugural conference on “The Nature of Nature” in 2000, not a single recognized Polanyi scholar or topic was included on the program. It appears that Polanyi’s name was exploited for specific purposes that Polanyi would not accept. Third, there is a serious difference between Polanyi’s understanding of science and the “intelligent design project.” This difference was recognized in the Baylor University External Review Committee Report when it recommended dropping the name of Polanyi and changing the organization of the center: “It is quite appropriate to associate the name of Michael Polanyi with discussions relating to science and religion. However, Polanyi explicitly indicated that he did not think that an agency such as that implied by claims of intelligent design need be invoked when dealing with the growth in complexity of the living world over aeons past (*Personal Knowledge, Towards A Post-critical Philosophy*, University of Chicago, 1958, p. 395).”

As a scholarly society, the Polanyi Society had asked William Dembski and Bruce Gordon, associate director of the Baylor center, to come to their annual meeting as far back as 1999, but they have never attended. In 2003, Dembski was invited to give a paper at the Polanyi Society meeting in conjunction with the meetings of the American Academy of Religion. Dembski at first accepted the invitation, and a program was planned that would include several respondents to his paper. Later Dembski withdrew, but the program on “Michael Polanyi’s Understanding of Teleology” was held with three Society members presenting their views.

The consensus of the three speakers was that Polanyi’s teleology would not support the “intelligent design” thesis. Their papers are now published in the March 2005 issue of *Zygon, Journal of Science and Religion*. The abstracts of these papers show each author’s independent basis for seeing Polanyi’s thought as incompatible with “intelligent design theory.”

In my paper, “Michael Polanyi’s Daring Epistemology and the Hunger for Teleology,” I put Polanyi’s epistemology in the perspective of his total philosophical work by looking at the clarification of teleology in philosophy of biology. To discuss Polanyi’s teleology one has to avoid confusing purposive phenomena in biology, sometimes called “telic,” with philosophical and theological teleology. Further one has to read Polanyi’s words in their larger context to avoid misreading his meaning. Once these clarifications are made, there are three major features of Polanyi’s thought that show why his thought would not support “intelligent design.” First, Polanyi’s view of human responsibility is to explore for the truth about reality that is creative and unfolding. Second, humans are faced with no guarantees about the fate of the earth but have to find the truth and follow it. Third, Polanyi’s view of knowing is so open and truth-oriented that it is critical of deterministic views. My conclusion is that Polanyi would not support “intelligent

design” because his thinking about truth and reality is antithetical to a universe closed and guided by an external agent.

John V. Apczynski’s paper examines whether Polanyi’s discussion of evolutionary biology in the framework of Polanyi’s epistemology supports the project of “intelligent design.” Polanyi was opposing the attempt to base knowledge on an ideal of impersonal data and verification. Apczynski finds that “when Polanyi’s reflections on a teleological framework for contextualizing evolutionary biology are properly understood as a heuristic vision, Polanyi’s position contrasts sharply with the empirical claims made on behalf of intelligent design” (abstract).

Walter B. Gulick, responding to the two prior papers, sees them as complementary and thinks they “capture well what Polanyi was up to.” He goes further, however, and argues that “Polanyi’s critique of evolutionary biology is flawed” by Polanyi’s notion of progress, his use of unsound analogies from the process of scientific discovery, and his use of concepts from physics and chemistry. Polanyi’s greatest contribution to teleology, according to Gulick, is not in evolutionary biology. His contribution is in his showing how “within a life of commitment to transcendent values humans can directly experience purpose and meaning” (abstract).

Proper consideration of Polanyi scholarship before naming the Baylor center could have avoided the mistake of confusing and mistaking his thought with the “intelligent design project.” The use of Polanyi’s name for the Baylor center wrongly linked Polanyi’s thought with Dembski’s own “intelligent design project.” Informed consideration of Polanyi’s work and the subsequent Polanyi scholarship reveals such a link to be unfounded and raises questions about the “intelligent design project’s” own search for truth.

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