

Polanyi and the Secular Age: The Promise of Broudy's "Allusionary Store"

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Wherever the crisis has occurred in the modern world, one cannot simply go on nor yet simply turn back.

—Hannah Arendt¹

Although I have been a member of the Philosophy of Education Society for more than 40 years, almost no one here has heard of me. You might, then, consider me a scout who, after several decades away exploring neighboring galaxies, is reporting back on what he found. And indeed, I “bring you good tidings of great joy.”² Well, if not exactly great joy, I bear exciting news of extraordinary possibilities, of a source of meaning and enchantment that, in what Charles Taylor calls our “secular age,”³ is no longer to be found in traditional sources such as this earlier Biblical report. Among the wonders of my alternative tale is the discovery that it was revealed, in its essentials, to PES well before I joined it.

In preparing papers for the Society this year we were invited to respond to the condition of human thinking described by Hannah Arendt in the preface to *Between Past and Future*. In her essay Arendt asserts that we live at a time marked by “the broken thread of tradition.”⁴ Reminding us of Taylor’s deeper concerns, she states that we have arrived at a point where “there simply [is] no story left that could be told.”⁵ As a result, we are, in an unprecedented fashion, left to our own devices. This constitutes a “predicament,” both personally and politically. But, Arendt emphasizes, the challenge is not to replace what has been lost, nor “to invent some newfangled surrogates with which to fill the gap between past and future,” but instead to learn “how to move in this gap - the only region perhaps where truth eventually will appear.”⁶ We are, in short, to learn to respond to the loss of authoritative tradition by becoming competent in a new sort of thinking. What I will argue today is that Michael Polanyi, in a manner vaguely prefigured by Harry Broudy’s 1970 general session address to this Society, provides both a vision of, and considerable practice in, precisely such an appropriately revised conception of thinking and reflective existence.

One of the recommendations given to presenters by the Program Committee this year was to “engage in sifting through the intellectual inheritances of our field in order to dig up the ‘lost treasures’ and examine the ‘sea-changes’ in thinking that render them particularly useful for understanding education in the present moment.” As an instance of digging up lost treasures, let us return to Broudy’s 1970 address. After that, in response to the second half of the Committee’s charge, we will review Polanyi’s grand project in its remedial dimension. In doing so, we will be responding to the additional recommendation that papers this year point to “new possibilities ... for doing philosophy of education.”

As many of you will know, Harry Broudy was a towering figure in philosophy of education during the middle decades of the twentieth century. In his 1970 address, entitled “On ‘Knowing With’,” Broudy, who was unceasingly at war with positivistic theorists and unimaginative practitioners who were calling for the elimination of foundational studies from the preparation of teachers, argues that the requirement to teach “general studies” in schools (i.e., liberal education or the humanities) can be justified only through an appreciation of the indispensable role played by them in the human imperative to order or interpret (and thereby understand) the world beyond the classroom.⁷ On Broudy’s view, “the humanities or the liberal studies are not primarily learned for replication or application, but rather to furnish an imagic and conceptual store (an allusionary base) *with* which to think and feel.”⁸ But, Broudy is quick to point out, as we interpret experience, we are unaware of the principles and categories (the “schemata” or “stencils”) in terms of which the interpretation takes place and is made possible. How can we justify mandatory instruction in material that operates without our explicit awareness that it exists? Or, to employ the terminology of the potential adversary, what are “the theoretical grounds for justifying instruction (determinate school input) for indeterminate outcomes (pupil outputs)”?¹⁰ Moreover, how can we account for the “anomalies and paradoxes that follow from the assumption that the primary use of school learnings is replicative”?¹¹

One such anomalous consequence of restricting ourselves to the replicative and applicative uses of schooling is that, given that almost no one remembers what he or she learned in high school history or literature instruction, and that even physicians seldom recall the details of their chemistry courses, there is no evident reason to require such studies. And, closer to home for members of this body, on what grounds can we justify the requirement to teach philosophy of education or other foundations in teacher preparation courses, if the measure of its value is a concrete and specifiable replication or application at a later time in the classroom? For Broudy the matter is clear. It is only in light of the phenomena of “knowing with” and “teaching with” that we can argue with any validity for “genuinely professional teacher education.”¹²

In his justification for general studies, Broudy relies extensively on Michael Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing. Now, Polanyi’s revolutionary epistemology is rich as well as strikingly fruitful. It is possible here to provide only a sketch. In brief, for Polanyi there are 1) things in the world (“clues”), of which we are tacitly or subsidiarily aware, that are integrated by 2) a perceiving entity, giving rise to 3) a focally known object. The meaning of the clues resides in the known object they make possible. In Polanyi’s terms, the knowing subject “attends” from the subsidiary to the focal. There are, then, two sorts of knowledge, the connection between which is made possible by an active intelligent agent.

Such activity is vital to Polanyi’s account. The integration that results in focal knowledge is an achievement. It is something that we *do*. Being a skillful activity, it can be performed more or less well. Education, broadly understood, plays a critical role. The integration described by Polanyi is typically improved by practice (i.e., it is modified to accommodate more or better clues). Experiences of various sorts

can and do contribute to expertise (which, in some contexts, we call connoisseurship). The performance or achievement that constitutes the triadic act of knowing involves a “tacit inference.” But Polanyi emphasizes that this inference consists of integration rather than deduction.

An important element in Polanyi’s theory is the concept of “sense-reading.”¹³ This is the name he gives to the process of dwelling in subsidiary clues and, through inference qua integration, arriving at a meaning. Again, education or experience is relevant - this time in two ways. To begin with, sensitivity to what is subsidiarily present can be refined. Second, as one engages in integration, prior integrations have an impact. While every instance of integration (i.e., establishment of meaning) is real-time and hence unprecedented, there is a propensity for the emerging integration to resemble those of the past. Polanyi, borrowing from Piaget, in this connection speaks of “assimilation.”¹⁴ This is the phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as “seeing as.”¹⁵ The learned capacity to subsume future experience under previously-learned categories is, as recognized by Broudy, perhaps the primary rationale for schooling and, at a more sophisticated level, liberal education. The process of sense-reading is informed and made possible in very large measure by what the individual brings to the moment.¹⁶ Concepts are important here, and so are theories or other constructs purporting to represent the nature of the world. But, as Charles Taylor frequently reminds us, so too is the wider, deeper reality of an “imaginary,” the term by which he refers to both “the generally shared background understandings of society, which make it possible for it to function as it does” (our “social imaginary”) and “the ensemble of ways we imagine the world we live in” (our “cosmic imaginary”).¹⁷ Sense-reading is a result of our “indwelling” clues of which we are typically unaware and then arriving at what may be understood as a skillful achievement leading to a decision.¹⁸ As we shall see, the imaginary we tacitly, even unconsciously, embrace turns out to be of momentous consequence.

Central to Broudy’s use of Polanyi’s account of tacit knowing is his concept of “the allusionary store.”¹⁹ When Broudy refers to the phenomenon of “knowing with,” he presupposes the existence of (tacitly known) principles and categories in terms of which focal understanding arises. These principles and categories are, ideally, the product of general studies required by the school. As they are learned (and then typically forgotten), they accumulate in the allusionary store and are available for later use. Broudy states:

Educationally, all schooling that is intended to function in interpretation of any sort accomplishes its goal by successful forgetting as well as selective retention. Categorical schemes used in interpretation function most efficiently as logical and psychological a priori — as stencils through which all experience is patterned ... Good general education imprints these “stencils” on the student so that in later life they function without his being any more aware of them than of his manners.²⁰

Illustrating the point in respect to the arts, Broudy adds:

The instruction will have been successful if the categories [the student] uses are appropriate to aesthetic analysis, if his judgments are genuinely his, albeit not unique to him, and if in talking like a critic, or at least in the manner of one, he gives evidence of habits of enlightened cherishing found in the connoisseur.²¹

It is important to recognize that the impact of the allusionary store extends well beyond aesthetic experience and appreciation *per se*.

By now it should be clear that the allusionary store, or base, is the reservoir of schemata or stencils in terms of which tacit knowing occurs. In Broudy's words: "In each domain the allusionary base is raided for images and concepts with which to construe the phenomena of that domain."²² A primary purpose of the school, then, is to appropriately stock the allusionary store. When this occurs, the result is "the educated mind," a concept of utmost importance to both Polanyi and Broudy which, alas, we cannot thoroughly explore in this short essay.²³ For immediate purposes, let it be noted that the educated mind, which is to say the individual with a rich allusionary store, is capable of functioning effectively in the world. Such a person possesses the wherewithal both to understand and respond to new experience and, fruitfully and with facility, to modify his or her allusionary store in light of the unanticipated.

Broudy's ideal extends beyond the "mind" narrowly understood. If the school is effective, the resulting individual will also possess an "educated heart" and "educated feelings."²⁴ (Broudy was a leading spokesman for aesthetic education.) In this vein, Broudy speaks of "the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic resources that make up the educated mind . . ."²⁵ It is unsurprising, therefore, that the educated mind for Broudy is accompanied by, and in part defined in terms of, the educated imagination.²⁶

Predictably, the two invited responses to Broudy's 1970 address to PES both raise the question of who may properly define the materials that would stock the allusionary store. The poignancy of this issue is heightened by the realization that, in his recommendations, Broudy clearly is referring to the public schools. A bold thinker, Broudy deliberately invites this challenge when he says: "Educated people can be characterized as those who think with the consensus of the learned, and the schools need no criterion of truth more infallible than that which the learned at any given moment themselves employ."²⁷ For Broudy, the "intellectual and value disciplines"²⁸ shape and are the bearers of such consensus. And so it is these disciplines that constitute the heart of "general studies." In his words: "The consensus of the learned at any given time probably is the best operating criterion for the school curriculum."²⁹ In the grips of a widespread skepticism regarding the existence of any foundation upon which such consensus could rationally exist, the respondents press their case. Broudy in turn will enter battle to defend this reliance on the disciplines and the consensus of experts.³⁰ In this regard, at least, there was more for him to learn from Polanyi, as we will see.

Before returning to Polanyi, however, let us complete the picture painted by Broudy. Turning to the curriculum, in order "to help the student build the conceptual maps needed to understand the world,"³¹ Broudy calls for instruction in the basic sciences plus three sorts of "developmental studies," viz., those of the history of the cosmos, of human institutions, and of human culture, in addition to classic "exemplars" of human excellence leading to "value education" (which he refers to as "a kind of value reconditioning").³² But Broudy's PES address reveals that there is yet another vital component of the recommended curriculum, global in nature. At the close of the address, he speaks of the humanities embodying "a vision of reality and a

continuity of commitment to that vision.”³³ Broudy’s educated mind and imagination is coincidental with a sort of person — a person characterized by confidence in one’s powers of discernment and one’s capacity to cope with a world that to a considerable degree consists of the unexpected. Precisely because of the ongoing influence of the tacit reservoir of general studies, and the shaping of character that accompanies the stocking of the allusionary store, Broudy’s educated individual possesses “the desire for coherence, for a vision of reality that supplies the overall integrative power.”³⁴ To his credit, and revealing the influence of Polanyi, Broudy admits that this desire and vision are the product of a “faith” that the world will unfold in an orderly fashion. But Broudy does not fully appreciate the “predicament” outlined by Arendt (for whom such faith is absent). If he did, he would have been prompted to draw upon Polanyi, who understands Arendt’s observation perfectly well, in a deeper and more fundamental way. For all of Broudy’s insight into Polanyi, he neglects that aspect of his thought that is capable of justifying his proposal during an age characterized by “the broken thread of tradition.”³⁵

Polanyi’s project in *Personal Knowledge* is well understood as an attempt to establish revolutionary cosmic and social imaginaries capable of responding effectively to the “predicament” — to the loss of authority rooted in the past — outlined by Arendt in her preface to *Between Past and Future*. What makes these imaginaries revolutionary is not their content. Rather, the source of Polanyi’s significance consists in his understanding of the fundamental character of what he is proposing and, in particular, in the manner in which it can be justified. What makes Polanyi’s enterprise so important is that an appropriate response to his imaginaries by reflective individuals in our time is capable of rehabilitating the sense of traditional authority (though not the former authority per se) whose disappearance constitutes the heart of Arendt’s unsettling analysis. The actual operation of Polanyi’s imaginaries, in the lives of his readers and, through the influence of these readers, on societies at large, is an instance of sense-reading. That is, Polanyi’s endeavor succeeds to the degree that those who come after him understand human life and its possibilities in terms of the framework or background he develops.

In his 1958 review of *Personal Knowledge*, Michael Oakeshott says of its closing chapter, “The Rise of Man”: “It is a vision of the natural history of mankind, brilliantly imagined and expressed in sentences of un-inflated eloquence.”³⁶ In offering this judgment, Oakeshott is responding to statements such as these:

While the first rise of living individuals overcame the meaninglessness of the universe by establishing in it centres of subjective interests, the rise of human thought in its turn overcame these subjective interests by its universal intent. The first revolution was incomplete, for a self-centred life ending in death has little meaning. The second revolution aspires to eternal meaning, but owing to the finitude of man’s condition it too remains blatantly incomplete. Yet the precarious foothold gained by man in the realm of ideas lends sufficient meaning to his brief existence; the inherent stability of man seems to me adequately supported and certified by his submission to ideals which I believe to be universal.³⁷

Polanyi characterizes the evolutionary drama as “a great spectacle, the spectacle of anthropogenesis [that] confronts us with a panorama of emergence.”³⁸ The spectacle issues in the human mind through which the process becomes aware of itself.

We have in this account a paradigmatic instance of cosmic imaginary. This is because Polanyi is offering to our imagination a picture of the world (a “cosmos,” to borrow from Taylor) and man’s place within it. There is an order and a direction to our existence. Within that order we find ourselves playing a critical part in a great unfolding. There is meaning. If we are properly informed and initiated, things — past, present, and future — make sense. Most important, because the imaginary contains moral sources, there are grounds for proper behavior and a good life.

Making Polanyi’s project distinctive is his understanding of the justification and thus the nature of such articulation. He is straightforward about the matter. In the Preface to *Personal Knowledge*, he states: “All affirmations published in this book are my own personal commitments.”³⁹ In the next paragraph he concludes: “But ultimately, it is my own allegiance that upholds these convictions, and it is on such warrant alone that they can lay claim to the reader’s attention.”⁴⁰ His cosmic and social imaginaries, which he is offering as the lenses through which we are urged to understand and shape ourselves and the world, ultimately have no ground other than his commitment to them and his allegiance to the ideals in terms of which they are defined. If we accept Polanyi’s invitation and employ his imaginaries in our own sense-reading, then what he declares to be true for his position would also be true for ours. That is, at the heart of Polanyi’s imaginaries, and accounting for their fundamental distinctiveness, is an understanding of the nature and possibilities of justification. When Polanyi invites readers to embrace his imaginaries in making sense of the world, he is calling for them to follow him in committing themselves to the act of commitment — to give themselves to the ideals constitutive of the imaginaries and to trust that doing so will result in salutary consequences. As Marjorie Grene observes, Polanyi’s argument is thus:

turned upon itself: the philosopher, examining the structure of intellectual commitment, finds himself committed to his theory of commitment in the same way in which the scientist is committed to his scientific theories. The philosopher, like the scientist, is seeking, to the best of his limited powers, to make sense of his experience: appraising it by standards which compel his assent yet which have no ultimate authority, in reason, beyond his own acceptance of them.⁴¹

Greene adds: “the freedom won in the conception of commitment is a Faustian freedom, to be earned only by daily winning it again.”⁴²

The ground of Polanyi’s imaginaries, which I am suggesting is their most important feature, is a topic to which he returns throughout *Personal Knowledge*.⁴³ At a critical moment he states: “The principal purpose of this book 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.”⁴⁴ Later, Polanyi declares: “‘I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.’ This sentence, summarizing my fiduciary programme, conveys an ultimate belief which I find myself holding.”⁴⁵ The genius of Polanyi’s declaration is its performative consistency. He is stating that his activity is authorized by nothing other than belief, and in doing so he is openly admitting that he is acting on the basis of belief. Or, to capture the point through a cognate term, Polanyi states that he must commit himself, and then commits himself to that which he has stated.

He admits that his position is circular and then concludes that such circularity is a virtue: "... by contrast to a statement of fact claiming to be impersonal, an affirmation made in terms of a commitment gives rise to no insatiable sequence of subsequent justifications."⁴⁶

Polanyi's imaginaries, then, are quite deliberately described as lacking what are commonly referred to as "foundations." They do, however, have *grounds*. It is this vision of grounds without foundations that makes Polanyi's imaginaries revolutionary. This revolutionary feature is an invigorating response to Arendt's summons to learn how to move in the gap created by the loss of authoritative tradition. This movement consists of understanding that completion of the cosmic drama depends in a vital way on how we think and what we do. Polanyi's redemptive "technique" consists in giving ourselves over to the prospect of the cosmic unfolding, doing so precisely in the recognition that there is no compelling foundation on which to base our commitment.⁴⁷ We are asked to believe in belief, to have faith in faith. Polanyi, the eminent scientist, says that we should of course think carefully and be guided by the evidence. Henceforth, however, the issue is not belief *versus* doubt, with the moral high ground preemptively seized by the latter. Instead, it is belief *despite* doubt, with the meaning of "evidence" expanded, and the mind open and alert to the consequences. Polanyi highlights the prospect of belief with integrity. At the heart of Polanyi's work, then, is that new sort of thinking — a newly conceived source of authority — for persons who find themselves between past and future. And, augmented by Polanyi's vision, Broudy's allusionary store is fully equipped. It is, moreover, no small gain that Polanyi's cosmic imaginary and conception of justification are precisely what Broudy needs to respond to critics who claim that his pedagogy of "knowing with" lacks sufficient foundation.

1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 191.

2. Luke 2:10.

3. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

4. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

5. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 6.

6. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

7. Harry S. Broudy, "On 'Knowing With'," *Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society* (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1970), 89-103.

8. Harry S. Broudy, *The Uses of Schooling* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 25.

9. *Ibid.*, 47, 54, 56, 108; "On 'Knowing With'," 91, 101; and Harry S. Broudy, "Tacit Knowing and Aesthetic Education," in Ralph A. Smith, ed., *Aesthetic Concepts and Education* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 99.

10. Broudy, "Tacit Knowing," 79-80.

11. Broudy, "On 'Knowing With'," 99.

12. Broudy, "On 'Knowing With'," 96.

13. Michael Polanyi, "Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading," in *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 181-207.

14. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 105. William T. Scott refers in this connection to our relying on “elements of memory and expectation derived from previous experience.” See “Tacit Knowledge and the Concept of Mind,” in *Interpretations of Life and Mind*, ed. Marjorie Grene (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), 119.

15. See, for example, the following from Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 103: “The power of our conceptions lies in identifying new instances of certain things that we know. This function of our conceptual framework is akin to that of our perceptive framework, which enables us to see ever new objects as such, and that of our appetites, which enables us to recognize ever new things as satisfying them.” The concept “seeing as” is often discussed in connection with Wittgenstein (in particular, Chapter 11 of Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*). There is a rich tradition of study of this concept within philosophy of education. See, inter alia, Walter H. Clark, Jr., “‘Seeing As’ and ‘Knowing That’ in Aesthetic Education,” in Ralph A. Smith, ed., *Aesthetic Concepts and Education* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970); Paul Smeyers, “Initiation and Newness in Education and Child-Rearing,” in Paul Smeyers and James D. Marshall, ed., *Philosophy and Education: Accepting Wittgenstein’s Challenge* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1995); and R. W. Hepburn, “The Arts and the Education of Feelings and Emotion,” in Paul H. Hirst and Patricia White, ed., *Philosophy of Education: Major Themes of the Analytic Tradition (Volume IV)* (London: Routledge, 1998).

16. Scott observes that the subsidiary awareness of tacit knowing may “include processes of both objective and subjective character, involving all degrees of observability from the fully clear to the completely unconscious.” Scott, “Tacit Knowledge and the Concept of Mind,” 119.

17. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 323. Do note that it is a marked shift in the cosmic imaginary of intellectual elites that preoccupies Arendt in the preface to her book. Broudy, *avant la lettre*, identifies Taylor’s social imaginary when he states that “the existence of a communal memory bank, a communal imagic-conceptual store is an unavoidable hypothesis. It contains the values and verities that for the members of the group go without saying . . .” These are among the vital contents of the “common allusionary reservoir” and their transmission constitutes a central rationale for general education. See Broudy, *The Uses of Schooling*, 29.

18. Decision, however, follows upon judgment. It is instructive that in speaking of “the adaptation of . . . a framework to comprise the lessons of a new experience,” Polanyi refers to “a conversion to new premises” that “is a decision, originating in our own personal judgment, to modify the premises of our judgment, and thus to modify our intellectual existence, so as to become more satisfying to ourselves” (Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 105-106). An inescapable personal element, manifest in judgment, is present not only in the act of adaptation but in routine perception as well.

19. Broudy, *The Uses of Schooling*, 21, 29.

20. Broudy, “Tacit Knowing and Aesthetic Education,” 99.

21. *Ibid.*, 100. Broudy is also the author of *Enlightened Cherishing: An Essay on Aesthetic Education* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1972).

22. Broudy, *The Uses of Schooling*, 73.

23. Polanyi dedicates an entire section of *Personal Knowledge* to the concept (see 102-104), which is a metaphor for his human ideal. Broudy employs the term throughout *The Uses of Schooling*. See 2, 20, 32, 33, 57, 103, 110, and 117. See also Broudy, “On ‘Knowing With’,” 101.

24. Broudy, *The Uses of Schooling*, 33.

25. Broudy, *The Uses of Schooling*, 103.

26. *Ibid.*, 110, 117.

27. Broudy, “On ‘Knowing With’,” 101.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Broudy, *The Uses of Schooling*, 57.

30. See, for example, *ibid.*, 98-99.

31. *Ibid.*, 89.

32. *Ibid.*, 99-100.

33. Broudy, “On ‘Knowing With’,” 101.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.
36. Michael Oakshott, "The Human Coefficient," *Encounter* 11, no. 3 (1958): 77-80, 80.
37. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 389.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., viii.
40. Ibid.
41. Marjorie Grene, "Personal Knowledge," *Encounter* 11, no. 4 (1958): 67-68, 67.
42. Ibid.
43. The third part of the four-part book is titled "The Justification of Personal Knowledge." See, especially, "The Fiduciary Programme" on pages 264-268 of Chapter 8, "The Logic of Affirmation."
44. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 214.
45. Ibid., 299.
46. Ibid., 324. Polanyi closes this statement with noteworthy elegance: "We undertake the task of attaining the universal in spite of our admitted infirmity, which should render the task hopeless, because we hope to be visited by powers for which we cannot account in terms of our specifiable capabilities. This hope is a clue to God"
47. Doing so is eminently representative of Polanyi's pedagogy of tacit knowing in which, says Broudy, "an existential situation" (Arendt's "predicament," for example) is translated "into a conceptual one" via the interpretative use of schooling: "Predicaments do not become problems until translated into concepts relevant to the class of phenomena of which the predicament is an instance When this occurs we can speak of understanding the situation." Broudy, *The Uses of Schooling*, 30.