

An Assessment of Three Epistemological Views: Michael Polanyi, Cornelius Van Til and John Calvin

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Once in a while, the world occasionally has people that stand out from the pack by holding totally different perspectives from the rest. Church History is replete with people who have held erroneous or even heretical views about God and His being. The field of law has had its own battles and different doctrines vying for attention or authority. The various other disciplines such as the Social Sciences or even the Hard Sciences have had their share too. One of them is the relatively little known Michael Polanyi of whom Francis Schaeffer wrote about as having had a different view in relation to epistemology as an authentic Scientist. While the majority of his scientific-philosopher colleagues by and large held that the truth could only be established by rational scientific means, he held that there was another kind of knowledge called “tacit” which people need to possess to arrive at the truth and believe correct things (Biggs. n.d.). We have drawn heavily on the works of others in writing this paper, some of whose structure we have adopted.

Michael Polanyi And Tacit Knowledge¹

Born and bred in Budapest (Hungary, March 12th, 1891) of well-bred Jewish parents, Michael later fled to the UK (1933) as Hitler and his troops were invading a greater part of Europe. He taught at the University of Manchester developing several philosophical positions in the process, some of which touched on epistemology (Friedrich, 2016). He was a contemporary of the famed CS Lewis though laboured away independently even if he probably never became a genuine believer in the sense that we know it. What is interesting about this gentleman however, is his epistemological views about how people arrive at truth.

Although a Scientist, Polanyi had problems holding on to the Logical positivism position which asserts that true knowledge can only be acquired by reason alone (Craig, 1984). Though partly true, according to him, Michael found this view inadequate and lacking in some areas. He argued that no true knowledge is

¹ Bretislav Friedrich has written a very insightful paper worth reviewing from which we gleaned much as we composed this paper. It is available at: https://indico.fhi-berlin.mpg.de/event/3/attachments/6/48/Bunsenmagazin_5_2016-Frie-Polanyi.pdf.

actually objectively acquired because even the best result, despite using the scientific method, was affected by people's biases and thus subjective (Biggs n.d). Michael held that it was not possible to get the exact knowledge objectively but what people eventually acquired was what he called "Tacit knowledge". This is knowledge all men inherently possess whether they are taught or not. This kind of knowledge, Dr Polanyi contended, was arrived at based on some presuppositions that we all hold. Thus, Polanyi, though not a believer but religious in some way (his family being Jewish but somewhat irreligious) contended that true knowledge of something was only possible by first knowing some supreme being. He stated the following about this tacit knowledge: "*an inherent knowledge of something that you cannot necessarily put into words, or give reasons for your conclusion. This tacit knowledge may just be a "hunch" that men have, but when they follow this leading, perhaps after looking over the data for long periods of time, they discover new and fresh conclusions. They do not intentionally go forth in the scientific enterprise to find or discover something new, but building upon time and information from within, and given the new understanding of the data, they come to new understanding*"² His sentiments were clear enough for every literate person. This great mind succumbed to death at Nothampton, England on 26th February 1976 bequeathing a wealth of deep and rich thought veins (Friedrich 2016). To-date, we still explore some of these.

Tacit Knowledge Explored

But what exactly is Tacit Knowledge and wherein does it consist? An absolute or all-comprehensive definition is elusive but we could say that Tacit knowledge carries the idea that knowledge is inert and naturally in built or developed upon rather than acquired solely through rational means as the majority of Scientists in Polanyi's day held. Tacit knowledge kicks in naturally and does not need to be acquired. As hinted at earlier, this could be a hunch, intuition or some such attribute naturally allowing humans know things as to their certainty or existence. By this assertion or position, Polanyi found himself on the opposite end of his fellow Scientists and academics of his day. Effectively, Polanyi claimed and asserted that human beings know more than they could tell.

The Business dictionary defines Tacit knowledge in the following terms:

Unwritten, unspoken, and hidden vast storehouse of knowledge held by practically every normal human being, based on his or her emotions, experiences, insights, intuition, observations and internalized information. Tacit knowledge is integral to the entirety of a person's consciousness, is acquired largely through association with other people, and requires joint or shared activities to be imparted from one to another...

² Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch Meaning (Chicago: 1975), 34-39

From the foregoing, it is evident that Dr Polanyi posited that inert knowledge rather than acquired empirical methods were (and are) the source of knowledge. Humans, by that token, assumed a higher role than creatures of instinct (Goodman, 2003).

Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick etc., and Logical Positivism, Faith and Presuppositions

Logical positivism has had its adherents over many generations. Their basic argument and presupposition is that Knowledge begins and ends with reason. This means that for us to prove anything as true, we must use reason only devoid of God and come to conclusions as we see fit. Based on reason and the facts we derive, we either believe or not (Biggs, n.d). Among the leading proponents of this view are Hans Reichenbach, Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick, Philip Frank, Herbert Feigl, Kurt Grelling, Hans Hahn, Carl Gustav Hempel, Victor Kraft, Friedrich Waismann, Bertrand Russell and Otto Neurath respectively. Effectively, logical positivists reject the soundness of traditional philosophy or metaphysics as held in the past. For them, the idea of faith does not fit or have a place in their framework.

Faith, Presuppositions And Logical Positivism

Faith entails believing something without any tangible evidence presented to prove that something is. In Hebrews 11, the Bible talks about faith being sure of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Unlike Logical positivism which demands endless reasoning before arriving at a point, using rational means, "*faith is where reason ends*", as someone has aptly quipped. "*Faith believes and questions not how or whether,*" another would justifiably claim.

Presuppositions on the other hand are ideas or assumptions upon which we build our postulations. For instance, for Christian Presuppositions, if we are to arrive at the true knowledge (assuming presuppositions hold true), we must begin on the premise that ALL knowledge is derived from God or we cannot truly know anything without Him. All other knowledge outside God may be incorrectly processed or is biased (Dockery & Thornbury, 2002).

John Calvin

John Calvin, that great Reformer from Geneva (1509-1564) had something to say about epistemology in relation to *Sensus Divinitus* (Biggs n.d). He, like Augustine before and Van Til after him, held true knowledge was in God alone and everything else whether in creation or not pointed to God. In his famous Institutes of Christian Religion, Calvin talks about God being the source of ALL

knowledge. His views would be expanded on by Cornelius Van Til in the 20th Century.

Cornelius Van Til

Cornelius Van Til was a Christian philosopher who held similar epistemological views as Calvin and others except that he expanded on their thinking. While other Christian Apologists (such as Jonathan Edwards, BB Warfield or Charles Hodge) advocated the evidential approach to apologetics, Van Til maintained that everything begun and ended with God. The man tenaciously contended that there was no need to summon outside evidence (i.e. extra Biblical evidence of sources) to prove the truth because these were self evident as revealed by God. While at Westminster, Cornelius exercised a great influence on generations of thinkers such as John Frame, Ronald Nash, Alvin Plantinga or J.V. Fesko (although they may have different inclinations or even oppose/challenge Van Til in some way) among others who continue his legacy.

Authority and Tacit knowledge

Many look to scholars, philosophers and other human authorities for truth and decision making. Rarely do they look further than those authorities. For the Christian, the Bible is the authority as it has the stamp of eternity on it. God inspired its writing and thus is the final court of appeal in the event of dispute or attempting to establish or indeed know the truth, which sets free. For Polanyi, Tacit knowledge was that authority. In the past people looked to the Government, Church or great leaders for authority but not so now. They look elsewhere including the subjective self. Things have been in flux to the extent mortals accept whatever the scientist-philosopher says without question.

The Bible's position

The Bible is very clear in its assertion independent of any presuppositions or theories. It simply states that God is and has always been from everlasting. Before Genesis 1:1, there is an eternity that is not mentioned (but of course assumed) in (or around) which God existed. The Bible is not a scientific text book aimed at proving any facts about the world but simply declares that God is. If any person is to know the truth, they must begin with the scriptures and end with them for the word of God is truth. While Michael Polanyi and other philosophers come with their arguments based on human reasoning and arguments, the Bible simply states that all truth is found in it. Whereas Polanyi demolished the Positivist views held by many philosopher-scientists about how to arrive at truth, he did not quite get to know the truth and thus declare it. Even sound theologians like Jonathan Edwards taught that God could be known by reason and "backward

postulation”, the Bible does not need empirical methods to prove that God is for He has revealed Himself inherently by virtue of having created human beings in his image.

Man’s fallen knowledge

Noetic Influence of sin came as a result of the fall. Man’s knowledge of the created world has been tainted by sin and thus affects perception. Though man knows the God who is there, the ramifications of the fall make it impossible to process things correctly in relation to God. Total but not absolute depravity is our lot. We may attempt at truth but soon get lost due to inherent corruption. Ephesians 4:18-19 rings true. Only the gospel in transforming grace changes things, including our consciences and world view.

A Few Take Home Lessons

From the foregoing, we could safely conclude the following:

1. “Truth” is defined differently.
2. Arrival at truth varies.
3. The Scientific method is not the only way to arrive at truth, although helpful and good.
4. Given the fallen nature of the human heart, truth cannot be diagnosed correctly or objectively. God must enable such to arrive at truth.
5. Genuine truth commences and emanates from God.
6. One’s world view colours how they view or interpret truth.
7. That said, truth must be sought in God’s creation. The resulting discoveries (if correctly interpreted) merely conform what God has already stated directly or not, in passing or by implication.

Conclusion

We can safely conclude that Theistic Epistemology is the way to go as taught by Cornelious Van Til, the presuppositionalist apologetics approach fore-runner, because we cannot truly know anything in the truest sense of the word unless we

begin with God. Though Polanyi was on track towards the truth, he failed to point the finger ultimately where the truth originates-God. He instead pointed his thinking towards what he called "Tacit knowledge". Perhaps that is the best light Polanyi had and should thus commend him somewhat because he differs from other epistemologists radically though he too does not match up to Van Til's position where God is over all things and it is from/in Him that all things consist.

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