

FREEDOM OF KNOWING

Introduction

Polányi's most fundamental claim is that knowledge is always the knower's personal knowledge who essentially and personally contributes to knowledge. It has been almost a truism from Kant on that the subject has a substantial effect on knowledge. However, according to Polányi, it is not an abstract general subject, but the individual person who leaves her personal fingerprints on knowledge. Granted this it seems to threaten the objectivity immediately. It has been much discussed how subjectivist this position is, whether there is any justification for the universal – or at least intersubjective – validity of such knowledge. We can approach this problem from a slightly different angle, namely, through the freedom of knowing and, this way, we link this epistemological issue to some moral problems. The problem of Polányi's epistemological subjectivism can be transformed into the question of what are the limits of our freedom in knowing, what sort of constraints are there to temper individual fantasy.

The expression 'freedom of knowing' is equivocal as a genitive structure almost always is. On the one hand, it may refer to the freedom we enjoy in determining whatever we would like to know, or whatever we would like to take knowledge of. It is the freedom *in knowing*. On the other hand, this expression may refer to freedom that is provided by or generated by knowledge. The relationship between knowledge and freedom is discussed generally in the context of this second meaning. We control our environment, social and natural, through knowledge and we enlarge the territory of our freedom by means of this control. In this paper, however, I would like to focus on the first meaning of this genitive structure. Which is – I would like to suggest – prior to and a precondition of the second one. The freedom we enjoy in determining what and how to know is the foundation of and the precondition of knowledge, and hence, the freedom we enjoy by virtue of knowing something.

Individual freedom in knowing

Freedom is often understood as a playground or an opening within which, in our case, we are free to know whatever we want, or to take knowledge as we like. This playground is circumscribed by ontological, epistemological and social factors. Here we should consider both positive and negative freedom in terms of these factors.

On the **positive** side of our freedom, we find the infinity of the reality *and* the indeterminacy and infinity of our cognitive powers. Positive freedom means *freedom for*, that is to say, we may initiate whatever we would like to do. It is the infinity of the reality that opens up a playground for us to create the knowledge of our own, to see the world in a specific personal way. This infinity of reality is closely related to the indeterminacy of the subsidiary components of understanding and the infinity of our integrating capability. Our cognitive powers are part of the reality, hence infinite. Infinitely many and indeterminate subsidiaries may help us to integrate them into infinitely many meaningful wholes knowing ever-new unpredictable aspects of the world. This is true both for the innate psychological factors and the learned elements of the tacit knowledge, like for example our language. It is not determined and not determinable for us what subsidiary signs to take into consideration when we integrate to focal meaning and how to integrate them. Thus within this playground, we are free to determine the content of our knowledge.

It is an *individual* (or truly personal) freedom, as the cognitive act is guided by *my own* bodily and psychological setup, my own learning history, skills and passions. In other words, our knowledge is not determined by the epistemological situation or circumstances. Metaphorically, we are free to see the world as we like within the open playground.

This leads us to the related issue of **negative aspects of freedom**. Negative freedom is *freedom from*, that is to say, we are free from certain influences, certain compulsions. First of all, according to Polányi, our knowing is not completely determinable by rules, including the rules of rationality. Our cognitive power – as far as the tacit component is concerned – is free from the dictatorship of the rules of rationality. More explicitly it is free from both inductive and deductive methodologies. This entails that no given premises or epistemological set-up can and may determine what the resulting knowledge should be. A person is not a rule-following machine in this respect. Furthermore our understanding in general is not fully determined by rules whatsoever, neither semantic rules nor the rules of language-use can eliminate the essential indeterminacy of meaning. Meaning is realized in understanding by the essential contribution of the personal tacit knowledge, hence the indeterminacy of meaning.

By saying that it is not determined I mean – in Polányi’s vein – that it cannot be calculated by rules whatsoever, from the inputs, and the inputs do not causally determine them. The second follows from the first since, according to Polányi, reasons can not be reduced to causes. Consequently my account of freedom is in terms of reasons and not in terms of causes.

The results above are closely related to the fact that Polányi sees knowing as an act instead of as a representation. He sees the similarity between knowing and skills or practical activities. Knowledge is not a symbolic representation rather it is our

relation to the world. Knowing is creativity; it is the result of our personal creative contribution to the given epistemological situation or circumstances. Tacit components are part of our “virtual” body by which we act during our research and knowing. We are free to determine what to do with them, how to use them. But we are given certain constraints within which we can execute a cognitive action.

Constraints

Now what constraints are there to stake out the playground of our freedom? What prevents us from pure subjectivity? After all you can believe what you like – and altogether knowledge is nothing but belief –, if you understand as you like, and if you have self-set standards for the criteria of the reasonableness of your beliefs. To prevent us from the freedom of daydreaming we have two factors: our cognitive powers *and* our commitments. Just to be clear, these are not meant to be disjunctive components of knowing, but they emphasize different aspects of constraints.

With our normal body and psyche we keep in touch with reality. As it is clear from Polanyi’s analysis of the ascent of our cognitive powers from biological levels to cultural ones, our cognitive powers are primordially evolved and brought about to maintain the closest connection with reality, to help us find our way in the world. The cognitive mechanism is not designed and primarily used to devise subjectivist daydreams. This latter is the derivative function of our cognitive powers requiring explanation and not the former.

The second element of compulsions, namely, commitment is an intentional link to reality. It involves that we are committed to our knowledge claims with universal intent. On making knowledge claims we try to tell other people truths about a reality believed to be existing independently of our knowing it. By claiming truth and concerning reality, all assertions carry universal intent. Universal intent is precisely the factor distinguishing the beliefs we consider knowledge claims from other beliefs having no such aspirations. Our holding a belief with universal intent entails that our belief is held true and concerns reality.

How can commitment delimit our freedom? Being committed involves that our psychological, moral and social existence is at stake. Under normal circumstances we give our name to our assertions signaling that we believe it and we have done our best to find the truth and this is the result. If we prove to speak nonsense too often then it will undermine our psychological self-image (regarding ourselves insane or untalented, etc.) and our moral self-image (being reckless, dishonest, etc.) and our social position (being incompetent, dishonest, etc.). Risking our

psychological, moral and social integrity seems to be the most powerful pressure on us that can be thought of, to make us resolutely strive for truth by using our cognitive powers properly and most effectively.¹ We are impelled to make our personal choice most prudentially within the domain of our free decision involved in knowing. Accepting a commitment is taking on a moral obligation with all the consequences it entails if not fulfilled.

This is not an ultimate guarantee for truth. We are fallible. But it exercises an ongoing pressure on us to improve our knowledge.

To sum up, *we can say that we do not enjoy moral freedom to believe what we like, but we enjoy cognitive freedom to know what we can depending our own cognitive powers*, but then we may stick to it also morally.

Let us not be misled by this formulation of the results. Commitment is just part of our cognitive powers. It is part of someone's personal capacity how far they can stand the pressure of risking their reputation, self-respect, job etc., and how flexibly they can comfort themselves with reassessment of the situation after a fiasco. Some can gamble on their whole private and professional existence even up to a lie or a professional sham while others cannot stand even the uncertainty involved in a normal scientific research project.

Seen from the other side, the factors limiting our freedom are the justifications for personal knowledge in the sense that they are reasons why we claim what we do. Justification is meant to be a guarantee for the cognitive reliability of the outcome of knowing, but it is not supposed to prevent us from false beliefs. If the realist conception of truth and the possibility of the check of correspondence between statements and reality are put aside, than *what better guarantee can we hope for the truth of an assertion than the researcher and the scientific community staking their reputation (and their existence in the long run) while they have done their best?*²

Before accepting a guarantee and thus a justification of this kind, obviously we should also see who is risking his existence and what sort of existence is at stake due to the commitment.

¹ It follows that Polányi supposes that the choice between the proper use of our cognitive powers and daydreaming is intentional. At this point, we are not ultimately, but may be temporally, at the mercy of some Gestalt-play of our psyche.

² „The result may be erroneous, but it is the best that can be done in the circumstances. Since every factual assertion is conceivably mistaken, it is also conceivably corrigible, but a competent judgement cannot be improved by a person who is making it at the moment of making it, since he is already doing his best in making it according to his commitment.” (Polányi 1958, p. 314.) *Mutatis mutandis* the same applies to the scientific community.

Transcendental conditions

Let us turn back to the status of the assumptions above. It is an assumption of Polanyi's philosophy that the idea of reality, the idea of the universality of our claims, etc. are supposed to be shared by all knowers beyond all indeterminacy. Is it not a contradiction? Certainly, it may be interpreted that way; everything is person-relative, how is it possible that these ideas are universal as they stand? But perhaps a more charitable reading would consider these shared ideas as transcendental conditions of knowing at all, i.e. as conditions of the possibility of knowing. "(O)ur acceptance of this framework is the condition for having any knowledge."³

Polányi radicalizes the outlook of Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment taught that man's freedom means that he is driven only by the laws of reason that are virtually the laws of mind and the essence of human nature. Self-realization is nothing but applying our universal reason to our particular situations and experiences, i.e., to our particular finite life. Freedom is based on knowledge, which is in effect based on the universal reason. According to my interpretation of Polányi we can accept this line of thought up to the point that freedom is based on knowledge, but it is not the knowledge of universal reason, rather it is a personal knowledge bearing the marks of the knowing individual. It results in a personal freedom instead of the freedom of universal reason, and "(t)his is ...our liberation from objectivism"⁴. Self-realization, accordingly, means that we grow ourselves according to, and, by means of personal knowledge integrating it into ourselves. Since no universal reason remained for us to trust in the personal responsibility, thus morality emerges already in knowing.

Reference

- Polanyi, M. 1958 *Personal Knowledge*, London: RKP

³ Polanyi 1958, 267. It is not alien to Polányi to take hierarchical structures as transcendental structures in which the higher level structure provides transcendental condition for the lower level structures. As, for instance, our biological setup is a precondition for our mind and social life. Polányi's arguments are also often directed to searching for preconditions. E.g. it is impossible to apply rules by the help of other rules, but we can apply rules therefore we must have a tacit cognitive power to do so.

⁴ Polanyi 1958, 267.