

Converging Roads Around Dilemmas of Modernity

Charles Taylor

I would like to discuss the links between Polanyi's work and a number of other thinkers, whom I see as converging from different starting points on certain common themes with some common ideas that changed our understanding of knowledge and ethics in the twentieth century.

THREE CONVERGING ROADS

I will start off by talking about three directions of approach to modern epistemology. The one you get with Heidegger that is later developed by Merleau-Ponty, the one you can get from Wittgenstein, and the one from Michael Polanyi. There is a very interesting convergence of these three roads.

What they converge on is a rejection of a certain atomism in the original epistemology that comes down to us from Descartes. In Descartes, and through Locke and others, you have this notion that from the world there is input and then the mind somehow works on combining those bits in various ways. This is basically a Cartesian idea, one bit connects with others and builds up to the knowledge of the world.

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The basic idea is that the input is atomistic. And what is interesting is that this is such a powerful idea that when we get the supposed overcoming of the Cartesian tradition by current thinkers, it hasn't really gone away. We now, starting about forty or fifty years ago, supposedly have machines that can think: computers. We believe we have a model for the mind and we don't even have all this ghostly stuff of Descartes that can get in the way of knowledge of the world. Well, I keep saying to those people, "You haven't gotten rid of Descartes," because they are still thinking in these mechanistic terms in which the input, these fragments of input, are then combined by a computer program. Within Descartes' ontology, something is either physical, and therefore mechanistic, or it's nonphysical entirely. People who see computers as the model for the mind still have that same idea of mechanism, they just suppress one term here and take the other, but they are still basically operating within the same picture; it is not a juncture in understanding.

Hubert Dreyfus, a collaborator of mine, who was also present at some of those meetings of the Study Group on the Unity of Knowledge, published a pretty good book that went through several editions, titled *What Computers Can't Do*, in which he uses some of the insights of Heidegger to shore up this whole notion that the atomism of the input does not account for human discernment and action.

Now I think that in the case of Heidegger and in the case of Wittgenstein—but maybe not Michael, because he started as a scientist and was not really formed in his early training by philosophy—it's Kant's influence. Kant made a tremendous shift forward when he claimed in the Transcendental Deduction that in order for a bit of input to count as information, it would have to be *of* an object, and then he moved from there to the notion that one has to have a *whole* that provides an idea of how that bit connects with other things.

Just a particular bit of information, for example, the humming I hear, is nowhere until I have at least determined it is not in my head, but it's a chain saw in the next woods, and so on. I place it somewhere. That idea of something being of an object, or a relation to an object, is what then begins to constitute the general route by which other people would climb out of that whole Cartesian picture. Kant brought the notion that one can't have a single bit of meaning unless there is a larger whole; there is not simply a computing mind, but an agent, and so on.

From this, you can generate the notion that is often referred to, in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's terms, as "the background." Now Michael got there by another route, by picking up on this basic feature

of a distinction between the subsidiary and the focal—attending *from* something *to* something. There's no such thing as attending to something without that *from*, and that *from* precisely brings in what other people call the "whole" or "background."

Now in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, he approaches from a somewhat different angle—from the angle of what can be put into doubt. He says if we take any particular bit of information, we can say, for any one particular, that, well, maybe *that's* not really true. Maybe it's the *mal genie*, the evil demon of Descartes, that's sending me this, and not the reality, not the world. But can we really doubt everything? Wittgenstein gives the example that maybe the whole world started 5 minutes ago. With that famous example, he shows that you can't ask certain questions about truth and falseness, and so on, without taking into account the whole background sense of what things are like in relation to which the question makes sense. So, you can't divide your knowledge up into little bits and say, "That's ok...but not that," and so on, on an individual basis. That doesn't make sense and it's not the way we actually operate. So, once again, Wittgenstein is bringing us into the fact that we operate always with a sense of the whole, with a sense of the whole background. The question about whether this or that is really so only applies within that background.

Switching back to Michael's take on this, you get the notion that, even in science, we attend from an interpretive framework that is largely tacit. And, sure, there can be big mistakes in our overall unreflected-upon picture; there are things that don't work out. And when we find very deep problems, deep upheavals, and deep unhappinesses that can force us to a major change in that background picture. Here we have something analogous to the Kuhnian paradigm shift. So here we see Michael's outlook also putting paid to another feature of the Cartesian way of thinking: foundationalism, which has been roundly attacked by a lot of us—even by people whom I think are still enthralled with the Cartesian picture.

Foundationalism would make sense if this atomistic feature were right. You check all the little bits that you can't get rid of and you think, "How do I combine these?" The combined view is built up from, and, therefore, justified in terms of the particular takes and the combinations which seem to make sense of them. So Descartes said, get down to the simplest elements, and try and get a clear and distinct perception of them, and try and get a clear and distinct perception of any links you have between them, and you build up to the whole.

But once you are into this basic, holistic understanding—which Michael introduces through the idea of the subsidiary and focal and interpretive frameworks that you attend from *to* some bit of knowledge—then that whole foundational picture doesn’t work anymore. You have another conception of reason—or of reason thinking about the world—in which you start off with a view that can’t be justified that way. You can’t build up from nowhere or from basic building blocks, but starting from this holistic take you can meet challenges that eventually force you to make some kind of a deep, also holistic, also more than simply particulate, shift in your background understanding, which justifies itself—which captures your conviction—because with your reason you can make sense of the world in a way you couldn’t before. In Kuhn-speak, these anomalies arise, and you can’t find a way of making sense of them, and then, with a paradigm shift, you can.

So there’s a really different conception of what knowledge is, what reason is, and what the building of knowledge is, which arises from this whole big shift from atomism to this kind of holism, and there is a concomitant shift from a foundational justification to a justification which is, in a certain sense, unsatisfactory. This other kind of justification is never complete in the sense that you can say, “Okay, that’s it; this is the final story here.” This is because you don’t know what other features are going to come along which you can’t make sense of. Retrospectively, you’ll see that some feature of your picture was not quite right, and you will begin to change that, but you never see that *prospectively*. It’s a feature of this kind of reasoning that it does not allow you to arrive at the point—which foundationalism clearly promises—where you can say, “This is it. This is the final word on this particular subject. We can rest content. There is no further room for challenge.”

So in all these features, we see that Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Michael Polanyi, interestingly converge. Marjorie Grene saw that of course, she was someone who read widely in all these fields and that’s why she called all of us together. She saw me working on Merleau-Ponty, and Burt working on Heidegger, and so on, and saw that we could interestingly talk to each other, and we did. It was fantastic and we had the experience where you begin to see this idea that is much wider than your own particular approach, and then you leave much more rich and ramified, and that was tremendously helpful.

KNOWLEDGE AS PERSONAL JUDGMENT

So let me move on to the second main theme I want to talk about, which is personal knowledge. Here, Michael added something that the others didn't necessarily have in their foreground. So, we are talking about the whole background *from* which we attend *to* something, and we try to scrutinize and examine it in the foreground. But now this background has, in a certain sense, two dimensions. I said earlier that it is our whole sense of what the world is like, and I gave you a very simple example. I hear this buzzing and I have to place it somewhere. Is it in my head or in the woods? No human being beyond the age of middle infancy is without this kind of distinction. So there is this sense of a world that gets richer and richer and richer, which also has errors creeping into it, but it is also the background of my whole life as a human agent with a certain take on things. So when a stranger approaches there is a sense of—"Do I know him? Do I not know him? Is he terrifying? Is he a threat to me? Do I run? Do I not run?" and so on. There is a personal dimension to our grasp of the world, which is also there.

Now Michael introduced this notion of personal knowledge that a lot of people found unacceptable. He said that even my scientific views are based on personal knowledge, and you can see how this rubs against a very powerful set of background assumptions that also go together with the Cartesian approach. I'm using poor old Descartes as a sort of punching bag, but in a certain sense he did compile all these themes in an interesting way. You see, the *I* of Descartes' *Je pense* (I think) is completely impersonal; it could be anybody. It is just sort of a floating mind which is presented with data and wants to know what to do with this data. Its activity is checking and combining this data, but this activity is again not anybody's in particular. It is a completely impersonal activity, by which we came to mean later on that it is completely method. It is so clearly laid down that anybody can follow it. You don't have to draw on any of your own personal insights or personal sense of things in order to follow it.

So we get this notion of a completely impersonal procedure, an objective procedure, which, of course—fast forwarded—is one of the basic ideas behind the computer models of the mind. We have the Turing output. The Turing intuition that—and even people like Marvin Minsky put it this way—we know that the procedure is really tight and objective if it

doesn't need any flashes of insight to see how you make the right move from here to there. If you can show that it needs no flash of insight at all, then it can be programmed into a machine. Machines don't have insight at all, but they can follow the procedures.

So we get the idea of a completely objective procedure with Descartes, and then later on when we get to the great ontological shift, as it were, this all gets mechanized. We get the idea that we can do what the mind does on a computer. So, if a computer can do it, the mind becomes totally mechanized.

Michael's view of personal knowledge tries to thwart this whole project. He tries to show how that impersonal picture doesn't make any sense. Even the greatest theories of the greatest scientists come forward because those scientists grasp and are convinced by a *whole* background understanding, including their personal understanding. People shriek with horror at this point; if they belong to certain traditions of philosophy, they recoil. They think Michael advocated subjectivism and relativism, but there is no reason for that alarm. We can still argue with each other—that's the point. We can say, "Look—your great take doesn't entirely make sense of this, that, and the other thing," and people have to respond to that and give reasons for their view. So, it is nothing like a license for "I feel this way! —I feel the universe is flat! And so, for me, it is!" You can't do that. But you can see how people brought up in the old Cartesian outlook find this very, very frightening. They believe that this opens the door to God knows what.

I want to come to the third line of discussion in a minute, and then we'll see how this epistemology actually plays out in terms of ethics, but you can see here that Michael's idea of personal knowledge is both related to this notion of the whole background that includes the personal—my sense of myself, my sense of where things stand in the world—and also puts paid to the idea that we validate our knowledge by purely impersonal procedures.

All these ideas connect: The Cartesian vision of foundationalism, this purely impersonal procedure, and so on. But Michael, as against the other people that I'm taking as my converging thinkers—Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and there are others, but I won't go into them—explored this personal dimension of the focal and subsidiary and he developed this feature. This is not to say that others could not really present it, but it was his exploration. I want now to look at that point—that personal point, or at least the point that there might not be an objective

procedure of reason—from another standpoint, and look through that lens—from that background—to traditional debates and discussions in Modern philosophy.

A MODERN MORAL DILEMMA

There is a big problem when the mode of thinking that comes out of Cartesian epistemology encounters ethics and begins to give answers to what is the foundation. See, once again, the worry is that maybe it's just, "I feel that way, and so it's right" and, no, we *must* have something better than that. And there are two big answers to that problem that you see developing in the Modern West. I'm talking about answers given by Hume and Kant—or Hume, Bentham, and Kant, which makes three—but one can see how Michael shows a road completely avoiding these three directions.

Well, what are the three directions? One is what Hume develops out of Hutcheson, which is to say, "Look we all start off with very powerful intuitions." You see someone beating up on someone else, and you say, "This is horrible, disgusting, terrible—it shouldn't happen." You see someone acting very benevolently, and helping somebody across the road, and you think, "That is wonderful! That is something really to be approved."

So, we have these blunt reactions of approval and disapproval. Hutcheson thought these moral sentiments were distinguished from other sorts of positive and negative reactions that are specific to how you feel. I mean, you're nice to me, and I think, "That's really great. I feel good because you are nice to me." But when you're nice to everyone, I feel this sense of approbation. You're nasty to me and I feel, "I'm going to get you!" But your nasty to everyone and I feel this feeling of disapprobation. And there is here a kind of psychologization that does not allow you to get behind these reactions; it's just the way it is.

And, of course, Hutcheson could say he was still in the domain of objective standards in ethics, because he held this view in the context of a very providentialist view of the world. According to Hutcheson, God, out of his benevolence and so on, endowed us with these reactions, but He endowed us with reactions which corresponded to the good and bad in the world. So we were precisely endowed so that when people acted benevolently it triggered off approbation and when people acted in a very hostile way it triggered off disapprobation. Ultimately it was objective, but in us it was anchored, not in reason, but in reaction.

Now Hume took that and ripped off the providentialist casing around it. It just became blunt fact—this is how we feel. Of course, there is some explanation for that psychologically in his notion of sympathy. And, yes, we extend the scope of our approbation of benevolence to lots of other people when we extend our response of sympathy, so eventually, we get a universalist ethic. But that is a matter of the progress of civilization, and on no account could you claim that this response of approbation is somehow rational insight—that’s what Hume really wants to get rid of. He wants to get rid of the whole basis of ethics, coming down from Aristotle and Plato. They don’t deny that I have a strong feeling when I say, “This is good,” but I see that this is good because I have grasped the idea of the Good, and that is because I have grasped the basic structure of things. For Hume, that is all absolute nonsense.

So we get this sense of approbation as ultimate. This leaves—even for people who have gone along with Hume—a certain worry that makes them a bit nervous: If we disagree, how do we decide? If I say, “That’s terrible” and you say, “That’s fine,” how do we decide? Well, Hume offers a way out. Because we are “turned on,” if you like, by benevolent acts, and “turned off” by hostile acts, we can argue, in certain cases, about the nature of the act in terms of its consequences. So, again, if I see someone ripping someone open with a knife and I say, “Don’t! Stop!” and you say, “You know that’s a surgeon and that man has a terrible cancer and his best hope for survival is that they take out this tumor.” Then we can all agree. These factual arguments deal with causation and consequence, as well as the intention to cause. I am cutting not with the intention to kill this person but with the intention to save him or her.

So once we introduce that, then we flip over into Bentham’s Utilitarian view. That notion of sentiment is great for a tradition of ethical right as the actual production of happiness and ethical wrong as the actual production of the opposite: of non-happiness, nonfulfillment of desire. Then we can just run through all these acts and see what the utility consequences are, and we can decide what the best act is to do. So we arrive back at a way reason can return to the ethical question. In a way, this is rationalism again, but while the older way turns on the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle, the Utilitarian way is humanized and thought to be subject to an explicit method.

Another reaction, of course, is Kant’s, who would say, “No that’s not sufficient”—and there are all sorts of reasons why that I will not go into—but for him sentiment isn’t enough to base morality on, so you

need to bring reason back in differently. And here we have a whole lot of followers of Kant, such as Habermas and Rawls, and a whole lot of people reediting the Kantian view. Well, what is the Kantian view? We bring reason back in, but it is a reason which is completely non-reliant on any powerful intuitions about what the good life is.

So it is a reason which, once again, is something that could be applied by a machine. There does not need to be any sort of personal insight or personal affinity and something of the like. We just need to ask: Is the maxim of your actions such that it can be universalized? Or in the case of Habermas' discourse ethics, we can think in terms of norms: Is this norm something that we think, in the end, will be—and we are not at the end, so we have to say *could be*—accepted by all the people talking and touched by it? This is a very interesting, subtle reworking of Kant. Say the following is the norm: everybody who does *this*, gets *that* punishment. Whatever it is, we ask ourselves: If they were all ideally rational, could the people affected by this, say, “Yeah—I guess that’s right. I guess that’s the best thing that you could do.”

Tim Scanlon, and others, also have very subtle reworkings of this. So you see that reason comes back in, yet it comes back in this sort of bloodless, impersonal way, which doesn’t owe anything to my own personal, powerful intuitions.

So we have the Humean route that allows for these powerful intuitions as the basis of ethics, and then the Kant or Kantian, or neo-Kantian, or neo-neo-Kantian route, which is trying to avoid that by bringing in a form of reason, but one that is totally clear of any of these intuitions, because precisely the problem is that our intuitions—our gut intuitions—differ. So how can we arbitrate? They answer that we need to arbitrate by some principle of reason that is not at the service of anybody’s particular gut intuitions.

Now I think Michael has found the way beyond this in a way exactly analogous to the previous discussion of method. You don’t have ethical, moral, or, for that matter, religious, views about the value of things unless you really *have them* as powerful intuitions. You don’t *have* these basically powerful metaphysical views unless they are something that you really feel. The notion of felt intuition is there; that starts you off. But that doesn’t mean the end of reason because these intuitions are not the way Hume presents them as total, immediate gut reactions to this thing—we see the knife coming down and react and say, “No!”—on the contrary. Here you can use Michael’s language of a joint comprehension

of meaning, coming from tacit background clues, or you could use my language talking about his language, but the focal feeling resonates throughout the whole background system and shows up certain ways of being as better than other ways of being, and certain kinds of motivations as more profound and more beneficent than others. And they offer us what Paul Ricoeur would call a hermeneutic point of view.

Ricoeur is also a part of this—I think—converging constellation. From a Ricoeurian point of view, our gut intuitions about human good and evil offer an interpretive net by which we make sense of people's lives—our own life and other people's lives. And that necessity of making sense of their lives is what opens us up to criticism. What's an extreme case? Perhaps Ayn Rand's: Does it really make sense to think that if you are being good to people, helping them, and so on, then what you are *really* doing there is sacrificing your possible road toward *Übermensch* status—by helping all the losers, and so forth?

If so, that's not just an intuition from my life, it also offers a certain interpretive grid for what human beings are like: There are those that are driven this way toward success and there are other people who aren't, and the ones who aren't doing well in life are the ones that don't have that drive and that's all you need to know about them—that they are these kinds of losers. If you then say, well, let's fine-grain understand ourselves and people: people we know, people in history, and so on. With such a simple palette of motivations, you don't get very far. There are lots of things that just don't fit this simple grid.

So, what I'm saying is these strong intuitions carry with them—I would put it this way—interpretive schemata for human life, which can be criticized. Sometimes they don't quite fit; sometimes they fail even the first hurdle. And this is a kind of hermeneutic reason that can be used; reason which asks us, "Does the kind of interpretive grid we are offering really make sense for human beings?"

Examples are very illuminating. Take the debates around the French Revolution that were restarted by Francois Furet, when he criticized the Marxist interpretation. You had this reigning Marxist interpretation, which was very favorable to Robespierre and the Jacobins. There were excesses—"They made a few mistakes," as they used to say in certain parlors—but they were basically accurate in seeing things as they saw it. They saw the need for the Terror to defend the Revolution. If it hadn't been for the Coalition invading, etc., etc. or the Girondins, we wouldn't have had this.

You may say, “Ok, that sounds alright,” but now just look at the language of the Jacobin’s: “Purity,” “Corruption,” “Rip out the corruption.” They’re not saying, “Now look guys, we’re in a real jam. The Duke of Brunswick is coming to war. We’ve got to wipe these guys out.” No, they’re not saying that at all—so how do you Marxists explain that one? It’s very difficult. You could say, “Well they had to *say* that.” But for whom? There would have to be someone else that they are impressing. There is just a huge hole.

Other accounts depend upon a background palette of motivations—people are motivated by the class position, by a desire for power and wealth, etc. and so you can see how these guys are opposing us—the *aristo*—the others are supporting us, etc., etc. You have a set of possible motivations that make sense of people’s action. So what Furet is saying is, “I’m sorry, it doesn’t work.” There are these very evident, and rather important, and rather hit-you-in-the-face phenomena of the actual language they use that the Marxist can’t make sense of. So Furet proposes another account.

Now he may be wrong, but that is just an example of how our ethical views—our ethical-moral hunches—are bound up with the proposing of certain explanations of behavior. Again we see, largely in the background, people carrying with them what I called a certain palette of ethical motivations, which are not necessarily spelled out. You know sometimes you have to sit down with a Marxist and dig deeper. You say, “Now what you must mean is that *this* is how people always work.” And he might respond, “Yeah, I guess so.” But it carries that background with it, and in that way it carries with it its potential vulnerability to reasoning.

So we have here the structure of reason that I attributed to Michael earlier on in his scientific view. That is, we start off with a certain implicit understanding, and then it hits a snag, and then we revise it, and so on. We can see the same thing in terms of reason in the ethical-moral field. The conception of reasoning in this field cannot gainsay the importance of the starting intuitions. It starts with intuitions—these felt intuitions—only, unlike Hume, you don’t make them brute reactions, you make them intuitions that are about the nature of the good. And then these can be upset, because the whole understanding of human beings that they carry with them—that they assume—can sometimes be shown not to work. Does it really make sense of our lives, their lives, the lives of an epoch, of how people acted in 1792 or 1794, and so on?

So, using the Ricoeurian language that I like, you have a critique of hermeneutic reason. And with hermeneutic reason you bypass the log jam in analytic philosophy between, on the one hand, going back to Hume, with some possible combination of Bentham, and, on the other, going in the Kantian or a neo-Kantian direction, neither of which really make sense of how we actually reason.

So those are three converging roads: Heidegger's, Wittgenstein's, and Polanyi's, and we see how they can bypass this forced choice between relying on brute feeling and a sterile conception of reason. There are others as well that one can talk about. Michael contributed with his understanding of how tacit background knowledge is important and with this personal aspect of all knowledge. Michael also had arguments to show that reductive mechanistic explanations don't work. I'm not sure I understand those arguments as well as I understand other parts of his work, but I am extremely sympathetic to that view. I think there is something sort of mad, or at least improbable, in the totally mechanistic explanations of animal life in general. There are lots of other issues we could discuss, but let me stop here and let the others speak, and then we can go on with our discussion.

Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi and the Critique of
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