

Michael Polanyi's Critical Realist Epistemology

An overview by Gary W. Deddo, Ph.D.

- 1) There is no general epistemology: We don't know *a priori* how we know what we know. There is no exhaustive theoretical explanation for our knowing everything or anything, much less whether there is a God. No one knows exhaustively or theoretically how we know anything.
- 2) Any partial understanding of anything we "know" can be explained only after we have come to know it, that is *a posteriori*. The following points are made *a posteriori*.
- 3) What we know and how we know it always exceeds our ability to convey it in words. We always know more than we can say or express by any means, scientific or otherwise.
- 4) The connection between language and the realities to which we refer cannot be reduced to language.
- 5) The means of knowing a thing is determined by the nature of the object of our knowledge. A microscope can't tell us much about the moon. Knowing calls for respect.
- 6) All knowing assumes some real contact/proximity with the object of our knowledge
- 7) All knowing, in retrospect, requires real interaction with the object of our knowledge (experiment/iterations/learning how to indwell the reality we are investigating, creating new means of interacting appropriate to the nature of that which we seek to know).
- 8) All knowing requires a certain quality of personal involvement, a form of trust, or submission to the object, a kind of faith. Nothing can be known on the basis of neutrality or pure skepticism.
- 9) All knowing involves learning from and interacting with a community of authority. There is no such thing as autonomous knowing.
- 10) You don't have to know how you know (or be able to explain how) to truly know. We always know more than we can tell, and say less about how we know than what was really involved in our coming to know.
- 11) Christian knowing is a species of this kind of scientific knowing. It acknowledges that the God of the Bible can only be known according to the nature of that God and that the process necessarily calls for some initial mustard seed of trust. Such a transcendent God must be intelligent enough to achieve a self revelation in our human condition so that there can be a real encounter of interaction and will always involve a community of those who have been seeking to know this God and may be trusted to have at least some minimal authority useful for our own investigation. This is why the Christian church claims, *a posteriori*, that it has discovered knowledge of God in Jesus Christ according to the scriptures of its community of faith.