

RECOVERING OUR KNOWLEDGE

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We can know more than we can tell.

—Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*

I. Theory of the Loss

Most people would agree that conservatories are the best places to learn music. Children who want to play the oboe, the flute, or the violin will be sent by their parents to a music school or a conservatory where they will learn music theory, music history, harmony, and the best techniques for their performance. Is there any better place to be educated in the performing arts? The parents may think that, certainly, an institution focused only on teaching music will be the best place for children to nourish their passion and their talents. However, conservatories can kill or, at the very least, diminish musical passion and talent. Let us picture a student who has attended a conservatory since the age of seven and is a pretty good pianist. He is also a very good singer and has close to perfect pitch. Still, he never enjoys music and never listens to music at home. At the age of sixteen he realizes that, although he may have a gift for music, the conservatory is not helping him understand and interpret it. The teachers have filled his brain with music theory, scores and notation, formal analysis, and playing techniques, alienating him from the actual music. It will certainly be best for the student to quit the conservatory.

In his essay "The Loss of the Creature," Walker Percy worries about the dangers of formal education and the loss of creativity. Some music students listening to a Beethoven sonata in a classroom are most likely not appreciating and understanding the piece; any non-musically-trained person casually pausing by the classroom because he likes the music is actually hearing the music in its entirety. The students have to "see the record, worry about scratches, and most of all worry about whether they are *getting it*" (Percy 759). They have spent all their lives learning music. Therefore, they are

expecting the music to be a certain way: Beethoven was one of the greatest composers of all time, so the sonata *has to be good*. When they listen to the piece, they calculate its value by comparing the actual thing, the music, with the previous symbols they know: entire papers on the sonata, notations, harmonic formal analysis, etc. According to Percy, a sightseer who visits the Grand Canyon will experience the same loss in perception. He will have seen the canyon before in pictures, postcards, paintings, guidebooks, or movies and will then “measure his satisfaction *by the degree to which the canyon conforms to the preformed [symbolic] complex*” (752). The Grand Canyon has been lost for the sightseer, because it “has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed” in his mind (751). The loss takes place whenever a person unwillingly borrows an idea, concept, or theory and uses it to experience reality.

Percy establishes a relationship between those who actually know and perceive things (the planners) and those who only experience reality through the ideas of the planners (the consumers). “The consumer is content to receive an experience just as it has been presented to him by theorists and planners”; he takes others’ ideas, perceptions, and knowledge as his own to experience reality instead of actually understanding (756). He has no *sovereignty* over the “creature”—the actual things and theories regarding the thing—because he takes experts’ theories (the ‘symbolic package’) and lives through them (755). Most importantly, what defines consumers is the fact that “they are not aware of the loss, beyond a certain uneasiness” (755). They do not know that they are taking the expert’s idea over their own and, therefore, need the validation of the expert. Consumers are insecure—their perception of reality is partial and has to be validated. Thus, they lose sovereignty over the things they observe.

This is not the only kind of loss experienced by consumers. As Percy explains, “the thing is lost through its packaging,” through “the very means by which a thing is presented for consumption”; but it is also lost “by the layman’s misunderstanding of scientific theory” (760). Sometimes, even just language—the maximum expression of human logic and rationalism—can negatively influence one’s perception of things. Percy appropriately uses the example of a student who is asked to study a specimen of a dogfish. The word *specimen* causes the student to view the dogfish as an example of a larger

category or theory, resulting in a "devaluation of the individual dogfish" (758). For the music student, a merely theoretical approach to music has the same effect.

In his book *How Did You Think of That?: An Introduction to the Scientific Method*, David H. Killeffer defines two different versions of the scientific method from which an expert may draw a theory. In the first method, that of Bacon-Edison, one makes a large number of experiments and observations "from which one draws conclusions and a theory" (24). The second method is "the Aristotle-Bancroft approach, based on forming a theory first and then seeking to prove or disprove it by experiment" (24). According to Killeffer, both methods can be used alternately or combined to obtain better results. The *Oxford Dictionaries* define the term "theory" as "a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained." These definitions show a general tendency of experts and the sciences to detach knowledge from singular physical events or experiences. The ultimate goal of the sciences is to deprive every individual or individual phenomenon of its individualized traits to develop a unifying theory that describes their general behavior. Not only does theory deprive things of their individuality, but its abstract and generalizing aspirations can easily confound non-scientists and non-experts.

When Percy states that "the loss has come about as a consequence of the seduction of the layman by science," he is implicitly suggesting that the layman does not understand the theory surrounding reality (761). Reality is covered in symbols and theory for both planners and consumers. The only difference is that planners are aware of the package surrounding things, whereas consumers are not and cannot understand it. There is danger in symbols and theory; they are limited and deceive most people into thinking that symbols *are* reality. Still, theory is useful and necessary. In fact, Percy uses theory to warn his readers of the limitations of theory. He uses the scientific method as explained by Killeffer, who, from his observations, draws the theory that symbolic investiture makes the consumer lose sovereignty over things. Or maybe he does the opposite, coming up with his thesis and then finding the examples and particular situations that justify it. Either way, Percy is explaining a general idea, an abstract theory that he is now sharing with his reader. Furthermore, he is using words to communicate, which, as he

explains, further categorizes reality. Even if he does not explain it, Percy must know that theories and symbols are necessary for human beings to achieve sovereign knowledge. Otherwise, why would he make use of them if he is aware of their potential danger?

II. Education of the Individual

The economist and social philosopher Michael Polanyi divides knowledge into two different categories: tacit and explicit knowledge. The Cambridge Dictionary defines tacit knowledge as “knowledge that you do not get from being taught, or from books, etc., but get from personal experience” (“tacit knowledge”). According to Polanyi, in his book *The Tacit Dimension*, the things that we know tacitly include “problems and hunches, physiognomies and skills, the use of tools . . . and the primitive knowledge of external objects perceived by our senses” (29). Because it is personal and involves factors such as beliefs and values, it cannot be easily communicated. As opposed to that, explicit knowledge “can be articulated in formal language” (8). Polanyi summed up these ideas, stating that “*we can know more than we can tell*” (4). There is, therefore, something very personal and individual in knowledge that goes beyond theory and symbols. Scientific knowledge is apparently explicit knowledge: it can be transmitted by way of theory and symbols. In his essay, Percy makes use of explicit knowledge—he is transmitting his theory and his thesis to the reader through a dialectic method. He divides the essay into two parts to make the reader aware of his train of thought, and always goes back to concrete examples and his arguments before drawing conclusions.

Percy believes this method is a way for consumers to understand theory and thus gain sovereignty over their knowledge. According to him, “the highest role of the educator is the maieutic role of Socrates: to help the student come to himself not as a consumer of experience but as a sovereign individual;” if the teacher guides the student through critical questioning and argumentation and makes him reach the right conclusion, the student will be a sovereign knower and will have overcome the dangers of theory (760-61). However, Polanyi argues that tacit knowledge is the core for both kinds of knowledge and that tacit and explicit knowledge are inseparable. Even

though theories and knowledge are evident and explicit, they can only be formulated and understood if tacit knowledge is used: “[a]ll knowledge is *either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge*” (“Logic” 7). This means that one must not only have developed a capacity for tacit “knowing” in order to understand expert images and theories, but also have the personal cognitive capabilities required by the act of knowing. Polanyi ultimately emphasizes the knower’s active participation in any act of knowing.

Stimulating explicit knowledge is indeed helpful and can make things—the referents of symbols—more evident. But although theory and explicit knowledge are fundamental to having complete knowledge, a developed tacit knowledge is far more important in order to achieve sovereign knowledge. Formulating theory in a more comprehensible and rationally structured way by means of the dialectic method is therefore not enough. Tacit knowledge is the only personal, individual knowledge; the tacit knower is the only one who will be able to develop original ideas. The consumer can cease being a consumer if his tacit knowledge is appropriately stimulated, but that can only be accomplished through an educational process of true learning.

Education is defined as “the culture or development of personal knowledge or understanding” (“education”). Since knowledge is composed of tacit and explicit knowledge, educational institutions should encourage both. Paradoxically, as Paulo Freire explains in the essay “The Banking Concept of Education,” schools and universities only focus on “filling the students with narration,” or explicit knowledge (368). Teachers completely ignore personal knowledge (368). And explicit knowledge without tacit knowledge is merely theoretical. Because the teacher does not foster the students’ creativity, they become able to view reality only through other people’s theories.

Freire’s theories on education are similar to Percy’s. True sovereign knowledge gets lost through theory, through the teacher-student relationship, and through educational institutions because “words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (Freire 368). Yet, according to Percy, the devaluation of knowledge is not the teacher’s fault or the expert’s fault. Throughout his essay, Percy makes sure to exculpate scientists and planners from causing the loss of sovereignty: “it is by no means the intention of the expert to expropriate sovereignty” (755, 756). Instead, he shows a complete lack of trust in the consumer’s abilities

and potential abilities. "The highest role [the consumer] can conceive himself as playing is to be able to recognize the title of the object, to return it to the appropriate expert and have it certified as a genuine find": the consumer is radically different from the expert in terms of cognitive capabilities and will never comprehend reality as scientists do (756).

Freire directly blames teachers and the educational system. The system of education is based on a hierarchy in which the student is considered ignorant and not capable of being a sovereign knower. If "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing," if students are presumed to be incapable of understanding theory and developing their own ideas, how can anyone expect them to overcome their status as consumers (Freire 369)? Polanyi believes that every person—whether a consumer or planner—is sovereign over his or her tacit knowledge, and Freire condemns the educational system for denying students this sovereignty. Percy does not trust the consumers' capabilities. Perhaps, if students had more support and more confidence in their implicit knowledge and personal talents, they would be able to free themselves from theory and never become consumers.

After I quit music conservatory, I had total support from my family. I had not played music in months, because I had lost my joy of music. It had been replaced by theory, by the 'symbolic package.' But I explored music again on my own. I searched for new perspectives, learned how to play other instruments besides piano, and discovered music genres and artists I had never listened to. I was able to recover from the loss and find out what music meant to me. This talent and passion for music was tacitly inside me, and my parents' faith in my potential was probably what allowed me to recover music. But in many other cases that might not be enough. Family and friends have a strong power over their children, but so do teachers.

It is the task of the educators to incite inquiry and creativity, to develop the children's talents and tacit knowledge. The conservatory teacher has to stimulate the students by letting them feel and enjoy the music and letting them interpret it in their own way. He or she has to let them explore the music on their own, let them listen to it, and guide them through the process. Students cannot be filled with narrative, emptied of the only knowledge that

is inherently *theirs*, and then be expected to be sovereign knowers. Sovereign knowledge can only be achieved through an education in tacit knowledge.

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