

# PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

Towards a Post-Critical  
Philosophy

by

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## PREFACE

THIS is primarily an enquiry into the nature and justification of scientific knowledge. But my reconsideration of scientific knowledge leads on to a wide range of questions outside science.

I start by rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment. In the exact sciences, this false ideal is perhaps harmless, for it is in fact disregarded there by scientists. But we shall see that it exercises a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science. I want to establish an alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally.

Hence the wide scope of this book and hence also the coining of the new term I have used for my title: Personal Knowledge. The two words may seem to contradict each other: for true knowledge is deemed impersonal, universally established, objective. But the seeming contradiction is resolved by modifying the conception of knowing.

I have used the findings of Gestalt psychology as my first clues to this conceptual reform. Scientists have run away from the philosophic implications of gestalt; I want to counterbalance them uncompromisingly. I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill. Skilful knowing and doing is performed by subordinating a set of particulars, as clues or tools, to the shaping of a skilful achievement, whether practical or theoretical. We may then be said to become 'subsidiarily aware' of these particulars within our 'focal awareness' of the coherent entity that we achieve. Clues and tools are things used as such and not observed in themselves. They are made to function as extensions of our bodily equipment and this involves a certain change of our own being. Acts of comprehension are to this extent irreversible, and also non-critical. For we cannot possess any fixed framework within which the re-shaping of our hitherto fixed framework could be critically tested.

Such is the *personal participation* of the knower in all acts of understanding. But this does not make our understanding *subjective*. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; a

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contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications. It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge.

Personal knowledge is an intellectual commitment, and as such inherently hazardous. Only affirmations that could be false can be said to convey objective knowledge of this kind. All affirmations published in this book are my own personal commitments; they claim this, and no more than this, for themselves.

Throughout this book I have tried to make this situation apparent. I have shown that into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge. And around this central fact I have tried to construct a system of correlative beliefs which I can sincerely hold, and to which I can see no acceptable alternatives. But ultimately, it is my own allegiance that upholds these convictions, and it is on such warrant alone that they can lay claim to the reader's attention.

*Manchester*

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M. P.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Manchester University has made it possible for me to accept the invitation of Aberdeen and to spend nine years almost exclusively on the preparation of this book. The generosity of Senate and Council in allowing me to exchange my Chair of Physical Chemistry for a Professorial appointment without lecturing duties, has placed me deeply in their debt. I want to thank particularly Sir John S. B. Stopford, then Vice-Chancellor, and Lord Simon of Wythenshawe, then Chairman of the Council.

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