

COMMITMENT, TRADITION AND THE CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY

COMMITMENT, TRADITION AND THE CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY:

MICHAEL POLANYI'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

By

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Abstract

In the quarter century since his death, Polanyi's political thought has received little attention. The few studies that are available tend to mis-represent the character of his political thought either by developing only one of its aspects, or worse by presenting his ideas in inappropriately ideological terms. In this thesis I attempt to remedy this situation and present a more accurate account of Polanyi's political philosophy. Through the careful analysis of fundamental aspects of his epistemology and ontology, and through a treatment of their relation to his political ideas, I present a comprehensive interpretation of Polanyi's political thought, taking into account the full complexity of his philosophical understanding. I present Polanyi as a keen interpreter of modernity, whose political thought is characterized not only by its 'conservative' elements, as is argued by all previous interpreters, but also, and more importantly by its anti- and non-ideological quality. I maintain that crucial to the interpretation of Polanyi's political thought is the recognition of the important and hierarchical relationship between man's commitment to the discovery and upholding of the truth of a transcendent source of order experienced in reality, and the role of traditions and standards in scientific, intellectual and political life. I maintain that the mis-representative accounts of Polanyi's political philosophy offered by previous interpreters are due in large part to a failure to recognize the importance of this relationship.

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If any part of this thesis deserves praise, the efforts of my many teachers are certainly in evidence; particularly Prof. Z. Planinc, my advisor, and Prof. M. W. Poirier of Concordia University who introduced me to Michael Polanyi and the study of political philosophy.

Many friends and colleagues have made my stay in Hamilton both a pleasurable and stimulating experience. In particular, Miss S. Waite helped me to endure and later enjoy the barbarian practice of "shared accommodations;" and numerous conversations with Mr. R Virdis both helped me with and kept me from the writing of this thesis.

We need a theory of knowledge which shows up the fallacy of a positivist skepticism and authorizes our knowledge of entities governed by higher principles. Any higher principle can be known only by dwelling in the particulars governed by it. Any attempt to observe a higher level of existence by a scrutiny of its several particulars must fail. We shall remain blind in theory to all that truly matters in the world so long as we do not accept indwelling as a legitimate form of knowledge.

Indwelling involves a tacit reliance on our awareness of particulars not under observation, many of them unspecifiable. We have to interiorize these and, in doing so, must change our mental existence. There is nothing definite to which we can hold fast in such an act. It is a free commitment.

But there is something imponderable for us to rely on. We have around us great truths embodied in works born of the very freedom which we are hesitating to enter. And recent history has taught that we can breathe only in the ambience of these truths and of this creative freedom. I, for one, am prepared to rely on this assurance for acquiring and upholding knowledge by embracing the world and dwelling in it.

“On The Modern Mind”
Michael Polanyi

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Introduction

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, interest in Michael Polanyi's philosophical writings has certainly waned in all areas of the human sciences save the study of religion. Among scholars of religion, interest in Polanyi is not only strong, but appears to be increasing. Indeed, since its inception, the Polanyi Society has organized its activities in conjunction with the American Academy of Religion's annual meetings; the editors of the Polanyi periodical, *Tradition and Discovery*, publish articles and review books dealing primarily with theological issues; and the vast majority of scholars engaged in critical readings of Polanyi's work teach in religious studies departments, divinity schools, or work as practicing ministers. That this situation has developed should come as little surprise to the reader with even a passing acquaintance with Polanyi's thought. After all, much of his writings treat issues of continuing importance to theologians, particularly those interested in the contemporary debates over the relationship between science and religion, reason and faith, and the moral and political responsibilities of the practicing scientist.¹ A small minority of this interest concerns

¹ In 1982, *Zygon: The Journal of Religion and Science* dedicated an entire issue to Michael Polanyi; and five of the first ten titles in the series "Theology and Science at the Frontiers of Knowledge," published by Scottish Academic Press, deal either specifically with the writings of Michael Polanyi or else draw substantially on his work.

biographical information of secondary importance;² but most of the essays produced offer insightful commentary on Polanyi's thought and his perspective on science and religion.³ Problems emerge, however, when these Polanyi scholars attempt to extend their findings to other areas of human interest, particularly, to the world of politics.

Perhaps because Polanyi's writings were not conceived as contributions to any one particular discipline, it is difficult to extend accurately one's interpretive position regarding one aspect of Polanyi's thought to another without going back to the careful analysis of the original work. Nevertheless, in recent years, such ill-advised extensions have been put forth with increasing frequency. The consequence in many cases has been an unintentional distortion of Polanyi's thought. And in some extreme cases, Polanyi has been made to champion positions he never expressly supported, and, on the basis of his philosophical work, never could have supported.⁴

² Recent issues of *Tradition and Discovery* have entertained discussions about Polanyi's personal religious stance based on private conversations and personal observations. Whether Polanyi was a practicing Christian (his parents were Jewish and his wife Catholic) is nowhere obvious in his writings. That his work is amenable to many Christian positions is certainly arguable.

³ Three particularly good examples are: Patrick Grant, "Michael Polanyi: the Augustinian Component," *The New Scholasticism* 48 (1974), 438-463; R. T. Osborne, "Christian Faith as Personal Knowledge," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975), 101-126; and D. Scott, *Everyman Revived* (London: The Book Guild, 1985).

⁴ For example, in a recent monograph, Jerry Gill has gone to great pains to present Polanyi's epistemology as a "post-modern" philosophical position. While I commend Gill for his efforts to make Polanyi more appealing to a wider audience, such forced labeling only encourages mis-readings of Polanyi's philosophy.

One such case, and the one that has provided an impetus for the writing of this thesis, is the recent use of Polanyi's work to argue for a decidedly ideological conservative political position or an ideologically charged Christian conservatism.⁵ While this may be a political position for which there is some evidence in Polanyi's writings, such an interpretation necessarily involves a great devaluing of other aspects of Polanyi's thought.

In two essays published during the nineteen seventies, R. J. Brownhill develops the first thorough analysis of Polanyi's political thought, highlighting the importance of Polanyi's understanding of the relationship between freedom and authority. While he is correct to do so, he chooses to situate Polanyi in the tradition of British conservatism, and maintains that the fundamental importance of his philosophy is its Burkean streak. While the picture of Polanyi's political philosophy painted by Brownhill is not wholly inaccurate, it encourages the neglect of equally important aspects of his thought.

In the only book-length study of Polanyi's political philosophy, R. T. Allen, whose

⁵ The most important of these include: R. T. Allen, *Beyond Liberalism: The Political Thought of F. A. Hayek and Michael Polanyi* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998); and R. J. Brownhill, "Freedom and Authority: The Political Thought of Michael Polanyi," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 8 (1977), 153-163, and "Political Education in Michael Polanyi's Theory of Education," *Educational Theory* 23 (1973), 303-309.

earlier work on Polanyi treated the theological importance of his thought,⁶ argues that Polanyi's writings suggest that political liberty can be achieved only through a conservative liberalism, and that "only a revival of [the] religious faith" lost in the post-Enlightenment world "could be the ultimate basis of a free and orderly society."⁷ Polanyi is put forward as a Burkean conservative, and is connected with fellow Hungarian Aurel Kolnai's dogmatic and ideological conservatism. Allen's use of Polanyi seems to highlight his positions on freedom and tradition at the expense of other aspects of Polanyi's thought. Allen's extensions are the product of his own distinct political prejudices, and often bear no similarity to anything found in Polanyi's corpus.⁸

Having said this, it is important to note that there are parts of Brownhill's and Allen's interpretations of Polanyi that are convincing. But, too often their interpretations of Polanyi's writings, and the 'logical' extensions of the ideas expressed in those writings as seen by Allen, present Polanyi's conservative streak in an

⁶ R. T. Allen, *Transcendence and Immanence in the Philosophy of Michael Polanyi and Christian Theism*, Rutherford Studies in Contemporary Theology, vol. 5 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

⁷ Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 241. Interestingly, Allen notes that this is a position that Polanyi himself could not quite reach.

⁸ For example, concerning immigration Allen states: "It did no good to American liberties to allow the immigration of large numbers of Sicilians and with them the Mafia, and European liberties would not last for long if a massive wave of Islamic Arab immigration from North Africa were permitted. A free society must close itself against groups who do not value its liberties, because freedom depends on common commitments." *Beyond Liberalism*, 183.

ideological fashion. It is not so much their insistence that Polanyi is politically a conservative that presents the problem; rather, it is the lack of attention they pay to the crucial relationship between traditional authority and the commitment to truth in reality that is integral to Polanyi's work. Allen's presentation - and to a lesser degree Brownhill's as well - fails to recognize and properly elucidate the important hierarchical relation between Polanyi's understanding of the individual, on the one hand, and a community's necessary commitment to a given reality and their commitment to traditions and authority, on the other. This oversight allows them to present Polanyi's political thought in too rigid and too ideological a fashion.

Brownhill, Allen and the like are of course correct in describing Polanyi as a thinker with conservative tendencies. Polanyi himself provides us with enough evidence of this. For example, he writes:

Those who would break up a society which can be operated only by the interplay of independent, narrow and often purely selfish individual aims, should ponder on it that the elimination of the existing shortcomings of our society may bring about immeasurably greater evil. However often this kind of warning may have proved false in the past, its principle is still true. It remains in the last resort of each of us in his own conscience to balance the perils of complacency against those of recklessness. The danger that such ultimate decision may prove erroneous seems to me comparatively slight, so long as we continue humbly to search for guidance on matters over which

we can never hope to achieve ultimate mastery.⁹

And, more explicitly,

Conservative means: traditionalist, empirical, averse to a comprehensive programme. I will have no quarrel with this philosophy, because there is too little of it, and anyhow in England tradition is Liberal.¹⁰

As I've suggested above, the conservative quality of certain aspects of Polanyi's political thought is not at issue. What is of at least equal importance in Polanyi's thought, although perhaps less easily recognized, is a steadfast antagonism toward ideological activism in scientific, intellectual or political experience. This is never stated explicitly by Polanyi. It is, however, a fundamental aspect of his philosophical and political position, and an understanding of this is required for an accurate presentation of Polanyi's thought. I maintain that Polanyi's anti-ideological stance can be observed both through a careful appraisal of his epistemology and ontology, and through an analysis of his lengthy critiques of Marxism and positivism. In this thesis I propose to present these aspects of Polanyi's thought in connection with his "conservative" tendencies to prove that Polanyi's conservatism is never ideological, and can never be pinned down or attached to a particular political programme or movement.

⁹ Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998 [1951]), 246.

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, "The Liberal Conception of Freedom," 1 (Papers, box 26, folder 8), quoted in Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 2.

In Polanyi's political thought, the affirmation of traditions is at all times tempered by a responsibility to an uncovering and upholding of the truth of reality.

The argument of this thesis will be presented in three chapters treating, respectively, the basic features of Polanyi's epistemological and ontological position, how these basic features inform his presentation of the political community (with special attention to the relationship between tradition and commitment to reality in the exercise of political freedom), and his explicit critique of intellectual and political ideology.

I begin Chapter 1 with a brief analysis of the idiosyncrasies of Polanyi's writings. I then examine Polanyi's epistemology and ontology paying particular attention to his understanding of the nature of reality and of man as a "knower" only as a participant in reality. I continue with a treatment of Polanyi's position on objectivity, subjectivity and the "false ideal of objectivism." I conclude the opening chapter by presenting Polanyi's understanding of objectivity in knowledge as an objective commitment to a given reality.

I begin Chapter 2 with a brief introduction to Polanyi's understanding of the political community, and the importance he attributes to an understanding of the problems faced by political communities in the twentieth century. I continue with an examination of the consequences of the erroneous understanding of knowledge

developed in modernity for approaches to political organization and political and intellectual freedom. Next, I provide a close reading of Polanyi's essay, "The Republic of Science," to bring to light Polanyi's constructive response to problems concerning the nature and organization of communities. Furthermore, I show how Polanyi presents the scientific community as a model for understanding both intellectual and political communities. I examine the important role of tradition and freedom in the improvement of Polanyi's well ordered community. I conclude with a brief consideration of how Polanyi's political philosophy has been interpreted as conservative, and suggest that these interpretations, while in many ways correct, do not reflect the whole of Polanyi's politics.

In the third Chapter, I begin by arguing that Polanyi's fundamental political position prioritizes the commitment to reality over an adherence to traditional authority. I suggest that this can be gleaned from Polanyi's political critiques; and I examine his critique of ideology in general through his critiques of Marxian moral inversion and modern scientific scepticism. I illustrate how this critique can be extended to cover other forms of ideology. I end the chapter by relating these critiques to Polanyi's conservatism, and thereby provide a firm basis for rejecting some of Brownhill and Allen's interpretive extensions and, more importantly, for developing an even-handed account of his political philosophy.

While this thesis is a response to the interpretations of Polanyi's political philosophy offered by Allen, Brownhill and the like, it is not intended as a formal

refutation of their work. Rather than merely highlighting the problems I believe to have found in their work, I have chosen to concentrate on developing my own interpretation of Polanyi's thought, providing what I maintain to be a more accurate reading of his political philosophy. There is basis for some of the arguments developed in Brownhill and Allen's work; however, concentration on those elements of Polanyi's thought that support their position, encourages an unfortunate neglect of the greater quality and complexity of Polanyi's political philosophy.

Chapter 1: Fundamental Aspects of Polanyi's Epistemology and Ontology.

Introductory Remarks

Preliminary to an examination of Polanyi's presentation of the "republic of science" and the well-ordered free political community, we must become familiar with the important features of Polanyi's epistemological position and ontological understanding. It is by way of his epistemological and ontological insights that Polanyi establishes his understanding of the character and limitations of scientific enquiry and political communities. I will begin, therefore, by examining Polanyi's understanding of the nature of reality, his re-interpretation of objectivity in knowing, and the importance he places on the knower's necessary commitment to an underlying reality in all that he knows. These overlapping and interrelated features of Polanyi's thought, as we shall see in the following chapter, inform and provide the basis for his understanding of the existential boundaries that free political communities must apperceive, and within which they must ultimately remain.

Before proceeding, however, a brief account of the unique challenges and difficulties posed by the idiosyncrasies of Polanyi's style and approach is necessary.

Polanyi turned to philosophy rather late in life after a distinguished career as a physical chemist. This turn was prompted by the intellectual and political circumstances

of his time; his writings reflect an attempt at understanding and overcoming the prevailing scientific self-understanding, and what he saw as the related political problems faced by Europe in the twentieth century. His critiques of positivism and Marxism, as well as his constructive response to the problems they reveal, are not the product of philosophical interest in an academic sense, but rather are the reflections of a practising scientist concerned with a deep-rooted existential crisis. Polanyi's work can be understood as an attempt at recovering and restoring a foundation of meaning for human existence eclipsed in much of modern empiricist science and philosophy. His work constitutes a novel attempt at providing a comprehensive alternative epistemological position grounded in human experience. And Polanyi's style and approach are novel as well.

Polanyi's thought is not presented systematically, and no one work proves the best or complete source for his reflections on a given subject. His philosophical writings are thus unlike those of the majority of professionally trained philosophers. As Richard Allen has illustrated, Polanyi's writings generally ignore the technical problems of specific philosophical traditions, and rarely address the writings of other philosophers. Nor are Polanyi's thoughts organized and laid out topically. Instead, Polanyi's writings emerge from reflections on his own experiences and engage the prevailing ideas, assumptions, presuppositions, cultural forces and political movements of his day in an interdisciplinary manner; his writings are at once studies in epistemology, ontology,

economics, ethics and politics.¹ Polanyi's uncommon approach is further magnified by his idiosyncratic writing style. Polanyi's writings are personal, self-referential and, as some have even argued, confessional in an Augustinian sense.² His writings are the product of personal reflections and contemplative exercises directed toward the articulation of his own experiences and the experiences of others; the style of his writings, moving easily between first and third person form, illustrates an attempt at uncovering universal and self-transcending meaning from personal experience.

These idiosyncrasies have been the source of much critique, and many readers have rejected his work out of hand as unscholarly and "obscurantist."³ Even philosophers influenced by Polanyi's thought have commented negatively on the unorthodox character of his writings. In an otherwise sympathetic review, Michael Oakeshott says of Polanyi's *magnum opus*, *Personal Knowledge*:

It is a book full of side-glances into other matters; it is disordered, repetitive, digressive and often obscure; as a work of art it leaves much to be desired.

¹ Richard Allen, *Polanyi*, (London: The Claridge Press, 1990), 15.

² See Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat, "Upon First Sitting Down to Read *Personal Knowledge*," in *Intellect and Hope*, eds. T. A. Langford & W. H. Poteat (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968), 13-18, for a treatment of Polanyi's confessional rhetoric. See also Patrick Grant, "Michael Polanyi: the Augustinian Component," *The New Scholasticism* 48 (1974), 438-463, who argues among other things that Polanyi is greatly indebted to Augustine stylistically.

³ See May Brodbeck "Review of *Personal Knowledge*," *American Sociological Review* 25 (1960), 583; and Stephen Toulmin, "Review of *Personal Knowledge*," *The Universities Quarterly*, 13 (1959), 212-216.

There are long passages (some of them among the digressions) which move easily and are unencumbered with the flotsam of extraneous observation, and there are short passages where a proposition is demonstrated with supreme neatness and elegance; but Professor Polanyi's ambition to let nothing go by default, to surround his argument with an embroidery, not of qualification but of elaboration, and to follow his theme into every variation that suggests itself, makes the book like a jungle through which the reader must hack his way⁴

Nevertheless, Oakeshott believes that hacking one's way through Polanyi's embroidered jungle can prove enlightening. His own epistemological position betrays a heavy Polanyian influence and the similarities in their political philosophies indicate a rather close philosophical relationship.⁵

Oakeshott's mixed review, then, suggests that a certain degree of patience is required when reading Polanyi's writings. At times, Polanyi states his position clearly in a few short sentences. In other places, his long drawn-out examples provide the best "last word" on a particular issue. In short, his work demands not only a re-orientation

⁴ Michael Oakeshott, "The Human Coefficient," *Encounter* 11 (1958), 77.

⁵ On the similarities between Polanyi and Oakeshott's thought see H. Wells "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55: 1 (1994), 129-145, and Mark T. Mitchell, "Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott: Common Ground, Uncommon Foundations," *Tradition and Discovery* 28: 2 (2001-2), 23-34.

in the way we understand human knowledge and human nature, but also a re-orientation in our approach to and analysis of philosophical writings.

Reality and Knowledge.

Fundamental to Polanyi's epistemological and ontological understanding is his recognition of an experienced underlying reality in which man acts as participant. As participant, Polanyi argues, man explores his existence through scientific endeavours and philosophical speculation for true conceptions (knowledge) that bear on this experienced reality; science and philosophy form the substance of man's explorations of existence, and it is through such pursuits that man gains conceptual footholds on "the shore of reality."⁶

While at first glance this position appears rather orthodox and expressive of experientially self-evident truths, Polanyi maintains it is an understanding that many in the modern world have either abandoned or renounced. The grounds for abandonment or renunciation, he suggests, develop as a consequence of a particularly modern epistemological mis-understanding. This mis-understanding demands that knowledge must be understood only as that which can be stated explicitly and explained to others precisely as a causal relation or algorithm. It is through such a mis-understanding, Polanyi argues, that science is reduced to the mathematical manipulation of impersonal,

⁶ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 123.

observable data, and philosophy is sloughed aside as metaphysical (and ultimately nonsensical) mentation. This position, Polanyi suggests, is the product of the false ideal of detached objectivity (positivism) and remains in many deceptively innocuous and somewhat less strictly conceived derivative leftovers.⁷ This false ideal, Polanyi argues, is ultimately a conceptual eclipse of the nature of man's experience as a participant in reality. Reality, moreover, is renounced by those who hold this false ideal as an unsubstantial conjectural concept; it is abandoned as a guide to the discovery of 'objective' or inter-subjective truth.⁸ What is lost in this process, Polanyi maintains, is the recognition that all knowledge is personal and the result of careful reflection on and analysis of man's participation in the world. While some knowledge can be stated propositionally, man knows much more than he can make explicit, thus Polanyi's oft-quoted phrase: "we know more than we can tell."⁹ Recognition of experiential facts, Polanyi emphasises, requires the recognition of an underlying reality. Knowledge,

⁷ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 181, 27; *Personal Knowledge*, 18-30; Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1983 [1966]), 20-25.

⁸ For example: "Positivism taught that science consisted merely in establishing functional relationships between the data observed by our senses and that any claim that went beyond this was undemonstrable. A reality underlying mathematical relations between observed facts was a metaphysical conception, without tangible content." Michael Polanyi, "Science and Reality," in *Society, Economics and Philosophy*, ed. R. T. Allen (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 227.

⁹ *Tacit Dimension*, 4.

therefore, is the discovery of that which *is* rather than the conceptual manifestation of what one wills or of what one has arbitrarily decided knowledge to be:

We should regard the minds of scientists engaged in research as seeking intuitive contact with these as yet undisclosed parts of science, and look upon discovery as the result of a successful contact with a hitherto hidden reality.¹⁰

Furthermore, reality, in all its complexity, must be understood as a governing experience of revealed and unrevealed epistemological limits:

The pursuit of science has shown us how even in the shaping of his own anticipations the knower is controlled by impersonal requirements. His acts are personal judgements exercised responsibly with a view to a reality with which he is seeking to establish contact. This holds for all seeking and finding of all external truth.¹¹

The pursuits of the scientist and philosopher “must be performed on the assumption that they originate nothing, but merely reveal what is there.”¹²

As stated above, this understanding of the nature of knowledge and the importance of reality has been abandoned by many in the modern world. Polanyi’s understanding of the importance of reality, while a seemingly self-evident concept describing basic

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund [1951]), 1998, 47.

¹¹ *Tacit Dimension*, 77.

¹² *Personal Knowledge*, 130.

human experiences, is an elusive concept which he argues must be reintroduced into man's scientific and philosophical vocabulary. In a late essay, "Science and Reality," Polanyi writes:

The purpose of this essay is to reintroduce a conception which, having served for two millennia as a guide to the understanding of nature, has been repudiated by the modern interpretation of science. I am speaking of the conception of reality. Rarely will you find it taught today, that the purpose of science is to discover the hidden reality underlying the facts of nature. The modern ideal of science is to establish a precise mathematical relationship between the data without acknowledging that if such relationships are of interest to science, it is because they tell us that we have hit upon a feature of reality. My purpose is to bring back the idea of reality and place it at the centre of a theory of scientific enquiry.

The resurrected idea of reality will, admittedly, look different from its departed ancestor. Instead of being the clear and firm ground underlying all appearances, it will turn out to be known only vaguely, with an unlimited range of specifiable expectations attached to it.¹³

Reality in all its complexity can and should be a concept that tempers the experiments of scientists and the speculation of philosophers, but is a concept that eludes a firm

¹³ Michael Polanyi, "Science and Reality," in *Society, Economics and Philosophy*, 225-226.

pinning down. While this in itself is not a serious problem, the modern reaction to the elusive in human experience is. Modern man, Polanyi maintains, suffers from an extreme skepticism. "The modern mind," he writes, "distrusts intangible things and looks behind them for tangible matters, on which it relies for understanding the world."¹⁴

The inexpressible aspects of man's experience of reality are reduced by the modern mind to conjectural inconsequentiality; the intangible, it is asserted, cannot be expressed explicitly without the danger of tainture through the subjectivity of the knower. Conceptions of reality, therefore, are said to fail as objective and impersonal sources for knowledge. Polanyi's counter-argument overcomes this problem. Although his position is somewhat more complicated than expressed in the passage that follows, it is offered as a rather succinct example of Polanyi's general position.

Persons and problems are felt to be more profound, because we expect them yet to reveal themselves in unexpected ways in the future, while cobblestones evoke no such expectation. This capacity of a thing to reveal itself in unexpected ways in the future I attribute to the fact that the thing observed is an aspect of reality, possessing a significance that is not exhausted by our conception of any single aspect of it. To trust that a thing we know is real is, in this sense, to feel that it has the independence and power for manifesting

¹⁴ Michael Polanyi, "On the Modern Mind," in *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, ed. Fred Schwartz (New York: International Universities Press, 1974), 131.

itself in yet unthought of ways in the future. I shall say, accordingly, that minds and problems possess a deeper reality than cobblestones, although cobblestones are admittedly more real in the sense of being *tangible*.¹⁵

Acceptance of the intangible as real and knowable precludes the modern dilemma. Polanyi's position suggests we need not make a choice between an explicitly definable foundation or the complete abandoning of traditional conceptions, however enigmatic. A middle ground that affirms elusive experiences as real allows Polanyi to overcome the reductionistic tendencies of foundationalism as well as to avoid conjectural arbitrariness. Experiences in their full complexity need to be understood as real, though often intangible, and as knowable, though not necessarily explicitly knowable. Polanyi's epistemological anchor, as Jerry Gill has suggested, is axial; it is a "foundation" that is not fixed, and yet needs no further support.¹⁶

The novelty and importance of Polanyi's position requires some further elaboration. Reality, Polanyi asserts, is given to man, but remains largely hidden from him. It is given to man, although it is not in man's power to grasp or understand reality in its entirety. Reality is the order of which man is a part and within which he exists; reality is the cosmos from whence he cannot escape.

The part of reality that man grasps, he grasps as a participant; and it is through his

¹⁵ *Tacit Dimension*, 32-33.

¹⁶ Jerry Gill, *The Tacit Mode: Michael Polanyi's Postmodern Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 57, 91.

participation in existence that man discovers and develops his personal knowledge of the reality he experiences. Man's knowledge of reality is restricted by the perspective he suffers through the particularity of his participation; and yet the particularity of his participation determines that which he can know.¹⁷ Polanyi's understanding of this fundamental feature of existence is much like that of Eric Voegelin:

The perspective of participation must be understood in the fullness of its disturbing quality. It does not mean that man, more or less comfortably located in the landscape of being, can look around and take stock of what he sees as far as he can see it. Such a metaphor, or comparable variations on the theme of the limitations of human knowledge, would destroy the paradoxical character of the situation. It would suggest a self-contained spectator, in possession of and with knowledge of his faculties, at the center of a horizon of being, even though the horizon were restricted. But man is not a self-contained spectator. He is an actor playing a part in the drama of being ... There is no vantage point outside existence from which its meaning can be viewed.¹⁸

Like Voegelin, Polanyi maintains that the ideal of the objective observer is an

¹⁷ Michael Polanyi, "Science and Man's Place in the Universe," in *Science as a Cultural Force*, ed Harry Woolf, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), 54.

¹⁸ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. 1: *Israel and Revelation*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 1.

impossibility. Polanyi writes, “all knowing is personal knowing - participation [in reality] through indwelling.”¹⁹ Furthermore, man is hampered by his inability to make explicit in language all that he knows; man’s imperfect knowledge of reality is both propositional and non-propositional, both explicit and tacit. Polanyi claims that, our situation as participants in an all encompassing reality means “*we can know more than we can tell and we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell.*”²⁰ Objectivity, then, if it is to remain as a guiding principle in the search for knowledge in an altered form, must divest itself of its impossible claim to neutrality.

Objectivity and Objectivism

In this section I explore Polanyi’s re-orientation of the meaning of objectivity away from the dominant doctrine of objectivism or “impersonal” knowledge. Against the common allegations by Polanyi’s critics that his ideal of “personal knowledge” is subjectivist, and even mystical, I contend that Polanyian objectivity forms, as it were, a compelling middle ground between objectivist understandings of objectivity and

¹⁹ *Meaning*, 44. As one commentator has expressed Polanyi’s understanding of man’s situation: “the depth of reality exceeds (man’s) complete grasp, yet it beckons (him) forward by stages.” Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 156.

²⁰ *Personal Knowledge*, x (emphasis in the original).

subjectivism.²¹

Polanyi's work rejects the ideal of scientific detachment (the ideal of the objective observer) in favour of an understanding of knowledge that accepts and demands the personal participation of the individual knower in all acts of understanding. This does not mean, however, that Polanyi disregards the importance of objectivity. Nor does he accept an understanding of knowledge that affirms an arbitrary relativism. As Polanyi argues in the preface to *Personal Knowledge*, his alternative ideal of knowledge "does not make [man's] knowledge *subjective*." "Comprehension," he argues,

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 contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown ... true implications.²²

²¹ M. W. Poirier has made a similar argument in two essays: "Michael Polanyi and the Question of 'Objective' Knowledge," *Philosophy Today* 32 (1988), 312-326, and "A Comment on Polanyi and Kuhn," *The Thomist* 53 (1989), 259-279.

²² *Personal Knowledge*, vii-viii. In places Polanyi maintains that his "personal knowledge" transcends the objective/subjective dyad: "we may distinguish between the personal in us, which actively enters into our commitments, and our subjective states, in which we merely endure our feelings. This distinction establishes the conception of the personal, which is neither subjective nor objective. In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action guided by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective." *Personal Knowledge*, 300. Polanyi is at once attempting to overcome positivist distinctions and defend himself against their critiques. His

Polanyi's target, then, is not objectivity, but a particular understanding of objectivity that requires strict detachment and seeks to eliminate all personal elements from knowledge. In short, Polanyi opposes objectivism. According to Polanyi, objectivism is the aim in modern science (and philosophy) to establish dispassionate, impersonal knowledge based solely on tangible and external facts. It tends to be reductionistic in so far as it accepts the precise methods of the study of physics as the model for all enquiry. Facts (understood as sense data) are separated from values with the intention of limiting knowledge to that which can be observed through sensory experience alone. Any theoretical understanding that cannot be reduced to sensory observations is rejected as value-laden metaphysical excess.²³ While Polanyi admits that the more rigorous strains of objectivism had for the most part petered out by the middle of the twentieth century,²⁴ derivative leftovers continue to leave their mark on scientific and epistemological self-understanding.²⁵ The major implication of this residual

use of the term objective in these passages should be read as objectivist objectivity.

²³ Polanyi contends that modern philosophic doubt is an important corollary of objectivism. He writes, "It trusts that the uprooting of all voluntary components of belief will leave behind a residue of knowledge that is completely determined by the objective evidence." *Personal Knowledge*, 269.

²⁴ Michael Polanyi, "The Republic of Science," in *Knowing and Being*, ed M. Grene (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 69.

²⁵ "The supposition that it [the world] is absurd is a modern myth, created imaginatively from the clues produced by a profound misunderstanding of what science and knowledge are and what they require, a misunderstanding spawned by positivistic leftovers in our thinking and by allegiance to the false ideal of objectivity

objectivism is the effect it has on the substance and importance of theoretical knowledge.

Limiting knowledge to that which can be physically and impersonally observed through sensory experience restricts theoretical insight to the careful prediction of future observable facts; theoretical insight is thus rejected as the motivating force behind scientific discovery and innovation. Theories, however, are not done away with entirely. Objectivism, in effect, renders theoretical knowledge as it is traditionally understood inconsequential; theories, in their diminished capacity as fact predictors, are made subservient to the collation of factual data. What emerges is an understanding of knowledge that is severely restrictive. For objectivists, the purpose of a scientific theory

is to save time and trouble in recording observations. It is the most economical adaptation of thought to facts, and just as external to the facts as a map, a timetable, or a telephone directory; indeed, this conception of scientific theory would include a timetable or a telephone directory among scientific theories.

Accordingly all scientific theory is denied all persuasive power that is intrinsic to itself, as theory. It must not go beyond experience by affirming anything that cannot be tested by experience; and above all, scientists must be prepared immediately to drop a theory the moment an observation turns

from which we have been unable to shake ourselves quite free.” *Meaning*, 181.

up which conflicts with it. In so far as a theory cannot be tested by experience - or appears not capable of being so tested - it ought to be revised so that its predictions are restricted to observable magnitudes.²⁶

Not only, then, does the objectivist hierarchy privilege the sensory aspect of human experience over all others, it reinvents theoretical knowledge to act as an organizational tool for the store-housing of impersonal observations.

Polanyi's response to this problem indicates that the objectivist understanding not only misconstrues the meaning of objectivity, but also that, ironically, it attributes greater objectivity to theoretical knowledge than to sensory experience. The latter argument is illustrated in his discussion of the transition from Ptolemaic to Copernican cosmology.

The Copernican understanding of the universe, Polanyi argues, removed man from the privileged place at the centre of the universe which he had been assigned by Ptolemaic cosmology. The justification for this "lay in the greater intellectual satisfaction [Copernicus] derived from the celestial panorama as seen from the sun instead of the earth. Copernicus gave preference to man's delight in abstract theory, at the price of rejecting the evidence of our senses."²⁷ Copernicus' preference, Polanyi

²⁶ *Personal Knowledge*, 9.

²⁷ *Personal Knowledge*, 3. See "Science and Reality," in *Society, Economics and Philosophy*, 225-245, for Polanyi's further treatment of the changes wrought by Copernican cosmology.

argues, can be shown to be the more objective of the two despite his reliance on abstract theoretical understanding. He states:

It becomes legitimate to regard the Copernican system as more objective than the Ptolemaic only if we accept this very shift in the nature of intellectual satisfaction as the criterion of greater objectivity. This would imply that, of the two forms of knowledge, we should consider as more objective that which relies to a greater measure on theory rather than on more immediate sensory experience.²⁸

Accepting this shift, however, is not a matter of personal taste. Nor is it the product of uncritical subjective preference. Rather, accepting the superiority of theoretical speculation implies a recognition of a theory's ability to make contact with something real. When this is the case, theoretical knowledge is not subjective. Polanyi supports this claim with three reasons:

(a) A theory is something other than myself. It may be set out on paper as a system of rules, and it is more truly a theory the more completely it can be put down in such terms ... [I]ndeed, all theory may be regarded as a kind of map extended over space and time. It seems obvious that a map can be correct or mistaken, so that to the extent to which I have relied on my map I shall attribute to it any mistakes that I made by doing so. A theory on which

²⁸ *Personal Knowledge*, 4.

I rely is therefore objective knowledge in so far as it is not I, but the theory, which is proved right or wrong when I use such knowledge.

(b) A Theory, once uttered, stands alone and cannot be led astray by my personal illusions.

To find my way by a map I must perform the conscious act of map-reading and I may be deluded in the process, but the map cannot be deluded and remains right or wrong in itself, impersonally. Consequently, a theory on which I rely as part of my knowledge remains unaffected by any fluctuations occurring within myself. It has a rigid formal structure, on whose steadfastness I can depend whatever mood or desire may possess me.

And finally: (c)

Since the formal affirmations of a theory are unaffected by the state of the person accepting it, theories may be constructed without regard to one's normal approach to experience. This is a third reason why the Copernican system, being more theoretical than the Ptolemaic, is also more objective. Since its picture of the solar system disregards our terrestrial location, it equally commends itself to the inhabitants of Earth, Mars, Venus, or Neptune, provided they share our intellectual values.²⁹

Polanyi's justification suggests that while theories develop in the minds of individual

²⁹ *Personal Knowledge*, 4.

scientists and philosophers and are as such personal and dependant on individuality, when a theory is made explicit in language or writing it stands on its own and exists independently of its originator. Thus,

when we claim greater objectivity for the Copernican theory, we do imply that its excellence is, not a matter of personal taste on our part, but an inherent quality deserving universal acceptance by rational creatures.³⁰

Polanyi's claim that preference for the Copernican theory is not the product of an uncritical subjectivism implies that theories have the potential for intrinsic meaningfulness. This potential is realized when theories form persuasive accounts of various aspects of experienced reality. Theories are not, then, devices for the cataloguing of the empirical world, as they are for objectivists, nor are they the fabrications of the imagination. Theories, properly understood, are tentative explanations of some aspect of existence resulting from investigations by scientists and philosophers into reality. They are, in effect, anticipatory hypotheses of the ways things are and the way they will be in the future. Thus, as Polanyi says of Copernicus and Copernican cosmology:

To say that an object is real is to anticipate that it will manifest its existence indefinitely hereafter. This is what Copernicus meant by insisting that his system was real. Copernicus anticipated the coming of future manifestations

³⁰ *Personal Knowledge*, 4.

of his system, and these were in fact discovered by later astronomers who had accepted his claim as real.³¹

Theories such as the Copernican model of the universe can be said to be objective if and only if they provide accounts of investigations into reality. Polanyi's understanding of objectivity, then, forms a middle ground between objectivist conceptions of objectivity and subjectivism or relativism. Polanyian objectivity prefers theoretical interpretations of human experience over simple sense experience. Theories are assessed variously: on the basis of the evidence provided to justify them; through experimental confirmation or falsification; and most importantly, on the basis of their intelligibility and communicability. Theories, however, are generated by the minds of individual scientists and philosophers. Thus, while theories can attain a logically independent status and, in effect, exist on their own, knowledge is never neutral or completely extra-personal. Polanyi writes:

The enquiring scientist's intimations of a hidden reality are personal. They are his own beliefs, which - owing to his originality - as yet he alone holds. Yet they are not a subjective state of mind, but convictions held with universal intent, and heavy with arduous projects. It was he who decided what to believe, yet there is no arbitrariness in his decision. For he arrived at his conclusions by the utmost exercise of responsibility. He has reached

³¹ Michael Polanyi, "Genius in Science," in *Society, Economics and Philosophy*, 270.

responsible beliefs, born of necessity, and not changeable at will. In a heuristic commitment, affirmation, surrender and legislation are fused into a single thought, bearing on a hidden reality.³²

For Polanyi, objectivity is intimately bound up with the personality of the knower. Objectivity concerns the involvement of the knower rather than an attempt at strict detachment.³³ All knowledge has a human element, and all knowledge that is objective has a fiduciary character. The distinction between the personal and the subjective, for Polanyi, develops on the basis of this responsibility to reality:

commitment is a personal choice, seeking, and eventually accepting, something believed [both by the person incurring the commitment and the writer describing it] to be impersonally given, while the subjective is altogether in the nature of a condition to which the person in question is subject.³⁴

When the knower is responsible his knowledge is the result of a discovery of something that is both other and real, and therefore objective. Without this fiduciary element,

³² *Personal Knowledge*, 311.

³³ “The process of knowing [and also of science] in no way resembles an impersonal achievement of detached objectivity. ... Science is not thus the simple, pure, crystal-clear fount of all reliable knowledge and coherence, as it has for so long been presumed to be. Its method is not that of *detachment* but rather that of *involvement*.” *Meaning*, 63.

³⁴ *Personal Knowledge*, 302.

what stands as knowledge is subject to the whims and delusions of the knower's subjective existence.

Commitment and Responsibility

In this section I present Polanyi's understanding of the relationship between objectivity and reality as a fiduciary relationship. I argue that this trust, in the form of a commitment to an underlying reality in all acts of understanding, forms the core of Polanyi's epistemological thought. Furthermore, I contend that this feature of Polanyi's epistemology forms a basis upon which all subsequent analyses of his thought must ultimately reside in order to be true to his philosophic understanding. Commitment to an underlying reality, I maintain, is the pre-condition Polanyi requires for all knowledge.

Polanyi's re-orientation of our understanding of objectivity implies "that man can transcend his own subjectivity by striving passionately to fulfil his personal obligations to universal standards."³⁵ Hence, while man's knowledge is always personal, it need not be understood as inherently subjective. Nevertheless, because the knower's intimations of reality develop in the form of personally held beliefs, unique to the knower in the case of discovery, Polanyi recognizes that there is always the potential

³⁵ *Personal Knowledge*, 17.

that these intimations might “sink into subjectivism.”³⁶ The check on this potential decline, Polanyi maintains, begins with the recognition of the fiduciary component of all knowledge. The knower, he argues, must recognize his obligations to the parameters set by all that exists independently of his thinking it.

Beliefs held outside a situation of commitment to an underlying reality speak truly only about the person by whom they are held. Such beliefs are often incommunicable because they are connected to nothing extrinsic to the subject who believes. While on certain occasions purely subjective beliefs are held as indicative of something true independent of the individual knower, they necessarily fail in their attempt at revealing some true aspect of reality. Subjective beliefs are in no way restricted. In a situation of commitment, however, “*the freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must.*”³⁷ In a situation of commitment the knower strives to fulfil universal standards in a search for the true and the real; commitment is a responsible self-subjugation to the uncovering of an independent underlying reality.

Polanyi’s understanding of commitment is perhaps best understood as a quality of

³⁶ *Personal Knowledge*, 299.

³⁷ *Personal Knowledge*, 309 (emphasis in the original). Earlier Polanyi writes: “The fiduciary passions which induce a confident utterance about the facts are *personal*, because they submit to the facts as universally valid, but when we reflect on this act non-committally its passion is reduced to *subjectivity*.” *Personal Knowledge*, 303.

relationship a knowing subject has with the existing things he seeks to know; responsible commitment must always be understood as a personal act.³⁸ This is made clear through Polanyi's treatment of the articulation of knowledge and declarations of truth. For the scientist or philosopher, Polanyi argues, hypotheses must be formulated for transmission as declaratory sentences prefixed by the words "I hypothesize."³⁹ This in effect eliminates "any formal distinction between statements of belief and statements of fact," thereby linking every asserting subject to the declaration asserted. Polanyi calls this the fiduciary mode of transmission. The asserter links himself to the asserted through first person association. Commitment forms the bond linking the asserted to the asserter in the other direction as a recognition that the knower's declarations represent his responsible attempt to peer into an underlying reality existing

³⁸ "The kind of knowledge which I am vindicating here, and which I call personal knowledge, casts aside the absurdities of the current scientific approach and reconciles the process of knowing with the act of addressing another person. In doing so it establishes a continuous ascent from our less personal knowing of inanimate matter to our convivial knowing of living beings, and beyond this to the knowing of our responsible fellow men." Michael Polanyi, "The Scientific Revolution" in *Society, Economics, and Philosophy*, 341. One is here reminded of Martin Buber's account of I-Thou relations: *I and Thou*, R. G. Smith, trans. (New York: Scribners, 1958); cf. Henri Frankfort, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (New York: Penguin, 1949), 12-14.

³⁹ "I have mentioned before ... the futile regress and the logical self-contradiction in which we become involved when casting the reaffirmation of a factual statement into the form of another factual statement, and have argued that we should avoid these anomalies by denying that the utterance '*p* is true' is a sentence." *Personal Knowledge*, 305.

independently.⁴⁰ Thus, while ‘*p*’ may in fact be true, it can stand as knowledge only when a responsible knower asserts that he believes ‘*p*.’

The responsibility which defines Polanyi’s personal knowledge requires that the scientist or philosopher suffer a passionate love of truth.⁴¹ Commitment to reality can thus be understood as a responsible commitment to the satisfaction of man’s intellectual appetites. While this analogy should not be taken too far, it is particularly helpful when we are conscious of the fact that appetites are distinctly personal and yet often concern objects of meaning that transcend the subjectivity of the knower. Appetites, whether appropriate or not, can be of a purely subjective nature, but they need not necessarily be so. Intellectual appetites, Polanyi suggests, can be said to transcend subjectivity when they are satiated by discovery rather than by inventive intellection. Commitment in this sense refers to the satiation of appetites that concern discovery of something pre-existing but as yet unrevealed. Polanyi writes that while our appetites are our own, the discoverer seeks a solution to a problem that is satisfying and compelling both for himself and everybody else. Discovery is an act in which satisfaction, submission and universal legislation are indissolubly combined ... [C]ommitment is a personal choice, seeking, and eventually accepting,

⁴⁰ *Personal Knowledge*, 299-300.

⁴¹ *Personal Knowledge*, 300: “to be tormented by a problem is to believe that it has a solution and to rejoice at discovery is to accept it as true.” See also *Meaning*, 211.

something believed (both by the person incurring the commitment and the writer describing it) to be impersonally given.⁴²

There is for Polanyi a correlation between the personal and the universal and impersonal in situations of responsible commitment. The universal is manifest in the standards set by an underlying reality. This underlying reality can be known, Polanyi maintains, only when the knower recognizes the jurisdiction of those standards as set over him. Discovery involves not the fabrication of something new without regard to the environment within which it will necessarily be forced to dwell, but rather the submission to something independently given to which the knower is guided by a sense of obligation towards the truth. Meaning emerges only when the knower remembers that he does not create the relation between meaning and what is meant, but that he has discovered that relation and has attempted to articulate it.⁴³ It can be said, then, that the responsible knower is always constrained by such relations; the knower is constrained by the reality he is exploring.

Polanyi arrives at his understanding of responsible commitment through an analysis of the movement from the more elementary commitments to general ontological and epistemological understandings. The full complexity of Polanyi's

⁴² *Personal Knowledge*, 301-302. Cf. *The Study of Man*, where Polanyi claims that man must be, "engaged in responsible decisions under a firmament of universal obligations." op. cit., 41

⁴³ *Personal Knowledge*, 63.

account can be understood through an analysis of the differences in elementary commitments as evidenced in human perception and skill development and the higher commitments required in discovery. Such an analysis, however, falls beyond the boundaries of the present study.

Chapter 2: Polanyi's Political Community

Introductory Remarks

In this chapter I turn to an examination of Polanyi's treatment of the relationship between the individual knower and the communities of which he is a member. I examine Polanyi's insights into the structure and function of the scientific community as a prototype for an understanding of the well-ordered political community. I pay special attention to Polanyi's emphasis on the role of tradition and shared beliefs in the community as standards by which knowledge and truth are judged. I am careful to note, however, that Polanyi does not substitute tradition or shared beliefs for critical reflection in the pursuit of transcendent ideals.

Polanyi's emphasis on the role of tradition and shared beliefs in the proper functioning of political communities has led many interpreters to treat Polanyi's political thought as a form of conservatism. His name has been linked with those of Michael Oakeshott, Bertrand de Jouvenel and Edmund Burke. While the conservative label may in some ways be appropriate, and the similarities with the aforementioned conservative thinkers a serviceable argument,¹ I argue that Polanyi's conservatism is at

¹ In an unpublished conference paper Polanyi makes the following statement regarding conservatism: "Conservative means: traditionalist, empirical, averse to a comprehensive programme. I have no quarrel with this philosophy, because there is too little of it, and anyhow in England tradition is liberal." "The Liberal Conception of Freedom," Papers, box 26, folder 8, 1, quoted in Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 2.

all times tempered by the necessary commitment to the continual discovery of an underlying reality. This qualification is neglected in almost all treatments of Polanyi's thought, and the general result is a mis-representative picture of Polanyi's political philosophy.

Polanyi's examination of political communities and the role of communities in the progress of human understanding centres on his interest in developing an existentially valid understanding of freedom or liberty, an understanding that can undergird his epistemological insights. Polanyi's understanding of freedom differs markedly from the common assumptions of the post-enlightenment world; it is neither individualistic nor egalitarian.² Nor does Polanyi's conception of freedom require that he attempt a re-creation of an original or natural condition to recapture man's lost liberty. It bears little resemblance to any of the prevailing modern positions, be they variations of liberalism or Marxism. Rather, Polanyi's conception of freedom is linked to a novel - and perhaps pre-modern - understanding of the role of tradition and inter-personal knowledge in the organization and functioning of both intellectual and political societies. Polanyi takes great pains to argue that freedom, whether intellectual or political, is not the affirmation of purely subjective interests. Rather, freedom always

² Here again similarities can be observed in the writings of de Jouvenel, *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 217-294, and Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative" and "The Political Economy of Freedom," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 407-437, 384-406.

involves a responsibility and self-dedication to the pursuit of transcendent ideals. Freedom, for Polanyi, entails the responsibility of the individual to act as he must.

Polanyi's views on freedom and liberty are for these reasons described by interpreters as communitarian, paternalistic, classically liberal, conservative, and in some cases even Burkean. C. P. Goodman has argued that such designations always tend to fall short in describing Polanyi's political thought, at least "without the addition of significant qualifications."³ In order to examine Polanyi's conception of freedom it is important that we first consider the reasons for his dissatisfaction with prevailing attitudes. It will become increasingly evident that the conservative designation fits Polanyi's thought only to a point.

Because Polanyi's work in this area is formulated as a response to the various social implications of the epistemological "errors" of the Enlightenment, I will begin

³ C. P. Goodman, "A Free Society: The Polanyian Defence," *Tradition and Discovery* 27 (2000-01), 8-25. Goodman writes: "Polanyi supports institutional autonomy against political control, and advocates free markets rather than central planning. To this extent, he is a liberal. Polanyi replaces value neutrality with dedicated communities, and asserts that rules require interpretive practices. To this extent, he is a communitarian. Polanyi defends liberty on the grounds of an appeal to progress. He takes knowledge to be an instrument of reform. To this extent he is a radical. Polanyi seeks to constrain the liberty of the individual by defending the role played by authority. He situates, and thus limits, our understanding of the world, advocating the transcendent nature of our values. To this extent he is a conservative. As is usually the case with Polanyi, you cannot attach a philosophical label to him, in this case liberalism, without the addition of significant qualifications." *Op. cit.*, 17. Goodman is, perhaps remarkably, the only scholar writing today whose work illustrates a concern for the often times inappropriate philosophical designations affixed to Polanyi's writings.

my presentation by examining Polanyi's treatment of the political implications of modern approaches to knowledge.

Errors of the Enlightenment

Polanyi argues that the epistemological expectations of the Enlightenment - expectations for the progress of knowledge and the overcoming of superstition - were too bold, and the distinctions and dichotomies that emerged in modern man's understanding of what constituted knowledge were in fact responsible for the loss of liberty experienced in the twentieth century.⁴ Furthermore, Polanyi contends that the emergence of a scientific scepticism after Descartes engendered in modern man a

⁴ Polanyi makes this claim in numerous places. For example: "Thus we entered on the twentieth century as on an age of infinite promise. Few people realized at the time that we were walking into a minefield - even though the mines had all been prepared and carefully laid in open daylight by well-known thinkers of our age. To-day we know that our expectations proved false." *Logic of Liberty*, 120. Cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 214, and "On Liberalism and Liberty," in *Society, Economics and Philosophy*, 201-209. Polanyi made his point most forcefully in a public discussion in 1960: "The point we are discussing is to my mind not whether the Enlightenment was the direct inspiration of Hitler and Lenin. It certainly was not, and I am accordingly in full agreement with the speakers who said so. What I have said was, in short, that the defeat of the Enlightenment was the logical consequence of an inherent weakness ... [The] Enlightenment had indeed lost considerable ground and had already set foot on the path to self-destruction - on the short path that leads from Voltaire to Rousseau and from Rousseau to Auguste Comte, who already foreshadowed the modern tyranny of political theory based on scientific premises. ... I see the present generation looking back to the ideals of the eighteenth century ... I [am] not sure whether this looking back would really lead to any sound course of action." *History and Hope: Progress in Freedom, the Berlin Conference of 1960*, 74-75.

yearning for certainty in knowledge through explicit demonstration. Polanyi argues that an important result of this was an inaccurate categorical distinction that developed between 'knowledge' on the one hand and 'belief' (uncertainty, superstition, etc.) on the other. This distinction, Polanyi maintains, had rather deleterious effects on man's moral life and the development of his understanding of freedom (particularly in areas of religious toleration). Because ethical principles can rarely, if ever, be demonstrated with certainty (as causal or mathematical relations), early modern sceptics concluded that a denial of ethical "beliefs," or the affirmation of ethical "beliefs" of whatever sort, must be tolerated as equally defensible positions.⁵ Thus, as Polanyi writes, "a system of mendacity, lawlessness and cruelty is to be accepted as an alternative to ethical principles on equal terms."⁶ The most obvious problem with such a line of reasoning is the possibility for a complete denial of tolerance under an imposed - non-traditional -

⁵ In various places Polanyi centres this problem in the person of John Locke and his arguments concerning the divisions of knowledge and religious and political toleration: "The argument of doubt put forward by Locke in favour of tolerance says that since it is impossible to demonstrate which religion is true, we should admit them all. This implies that we must not impose beliefs that are not demonstrable ... It follows that unless ethical principles can be demonstrated with certainty, we should refrain from imposing them and should tolerate their total denial." *Logic of Liberty*, 120; cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 9, 266, 271; "The Scientific Revolution," in *Society, Economics, and Philosophy*, 331. This line of interpretation is taken further, and made more sinister by Eric Voegelin. See his letters to Leo Strauss in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, B. Cooper and P. Emberley, eds. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 92-97.

⁶ *Logic of Liberty*, 120.

unethical system: “Here the inconsistency of a liberalism based on philosophic doubt becomes apparent: freedom of thought is destroyed by the extension of doubt to the field of traditional ideals.”⁷ This philosophic doubt, when taken to its logical conclusion, leaves men without a basis for discriminating between, for example, a Christian ethic of other-regarding love or the rationalization of the death camps of Nazi Germany. The “truth” of either position is, for the modern sceptic, impossible to make explicit and impersonal, impossible to defend on the basis of ‘rational understanding.’ Such is the consequence when the doctrine of doubt resulting from the categorical distinctions of modern epistemology is extended to traditional and foundational moral ideals.⁸

Of course, logical consequences do not necessarily manifest themselves as historical realities. While one might be persuaded by Polanyi’s arguments where modern totalitarianism is concerned, historically speaking these logical consequences did not work themselves out throughout the western world. Polanyi claims that the totalitarian problem is only necessarily a possibility under a system of philosophic doubt. In the Anglo-American world, Polanyi is careful to note, the problems of fascism and communism were for the most part avoided. This, according to Polanyi, is often misinterpreted and misunderstood as the result of a fundamental difference in

⁷ *Logic of Liberty*, 120-121.

⁸ *Personal Knowledge*, 214.

kind between the varieties of liberalism and the varieties of totalitarianism. Polanyi's explanation for why these problems were avoided by the western world is different and bears close attention.

Polanyi argues that "the consummation of this destructive process was prevented in the Anglo-American region by an instinctive reluctance to pursue the accepted philosophic premises to their ultimate conclusions."⁹ This was due in large part to the tacit traditions and continuing institutions of England and America, traditions and institutions that were affirmed even though not demonstrably valid according to Enlightenment criteria. The doctrine of doubt that became the fashion in modern Europe, Polanyi suggests, never completely eclipsed the religiously based moral principles that lay behind the traditions of English common law and the American Constitution.¹⁰ In the Anglo-American world a wholly "open" society (in the sense indicated in the writings of Karl Popper) never fully materialized; there was a continuing underlying dedication to traditional beliefs that saved Anglo-American liberalism from self-destruction. Why was this the case?

Polanyi's answer to this complicated question rests on the importance he ascribes to the role of tradition in political and intellectual communities. Polanyi suggest that Anglo-American liberalism was saved from self-destruction by speculative and practical

⁹ *Logic of Liberty*, 121.

¹⁰ *Logic of Liberty*, 122.

restraints resulting from its deeply religious character. He writes:

So long as philosophic doubt was applied only to secure equal rights to all religions and was prohibited from demanding equal rights also for irreligion, the same restraint would automatically apply in respect to moral beliefs. A scepticism which was kept on a short leash for the sake of preserving religious beliefs, would hardly become a menace to fundamental moral principles.¹¹

Furthermore, Polanyi maintains that the establishment of certain modern democratic principles (e.g. the American Constitution) at a time when religious concerns were still at the forefront of public discourse in the Anglo-American world embedded traditional moral principles in the institutional framework within which society was made to function. Traditions pre-dating the rise of philosophic scepticism kept in check the revolutionary tumult experienced by France, and later, the remainder of continental Europe.

Polanyi maintains that the most serious consequence resulting from philosophic scepticism on the continent was not, as one might imagine, the inability to defend universal standards of ethical behaviour. Nor was it the loss of standards altogether. Rather, Polanyi argues that the most serious consequence of the modern doctrine of doubt was the attempt by philosophers to put forward alternative arguments for the

¹¹ *Logic of Liberty*, 122.

establishing of universal standards of behaviour, standards that developed not from reflection on experience, but from abstract intellectual experiments that disregarded man's actual experience of reality. The fundamental problem, Polanyi writes, was that "creative genius claimed to be the renewer of all values," and as a consequence ethical standards became the un-grounded product of the mind by which they were generated.¹² This philosophic problem, Polanyi maintains, emerged in history in an assortment of political ideologies: Enlightenment individualism, nationalism, and socialism. The political result was of great significance. Polanyi writes:

The process of replacing moral ideals by philosophically less vulnerable objectives [less vulnerable to the doctrine of doubt] was carried out in all seriousness. This is not mere pseudo-substitution, but a *real* substitution of human appetites and human passions for reason and the ideals of man.¹³

Such new standards were needed, Polanyi argues, because modern skepticism emerged

¹² *Logic of Liberty*, 123.

¹³ *Logic of Liberty*, 126. See also "Tyranny and Freedom: Ancient and Modern," *Quest* 20 (1959), 9-18, where Polanyi treats this problem using historical examples. Cf. Eric Voegelin on activist dreamers and the eclipse of reality in: "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation," *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12: *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, E. Sandoz, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 315-375; "The Eclipse of Reality," *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 28: *What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, T. Holloweck, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 111-162. Although Voegelin has written much more on this subject than Polanyi, and his presentation of the problem is far more sophisticated, I believe that the two authors are fundamentally in agreement.

along with a yearning for perfection.

Modern man's indignation at the follies of religious superstitions is at once a denunciation of traditional and transcendent moral authority, and a desiring for moral perfectionism; while the modern sceptic sees traditional morality as artificial, and may in fact denounce morality in any guise, he nonetheless moves forward "charged with moral fury."¹⁴ Polanyi has called this paradoxical combination of moral nihilism and moral fury the problem of "moral inversion." He describes the problem in the following manner:

the modern intellectual's ... skepticism-with-perfectionism scorns any expression of his own traditional morality; it despises it as banal, second-hand, hypocritical. Divided against himself, he seeks an identity safe against self-doubt. Having condemned the distinction between good and evil as dishonest, he can find pride in the honesty of his condemnation. Since ordinary decent behaviour can never be safe against the suspicion of sheer conformity or downright hypocrisy, only an absolutely amoral, meaningless act can assure man of complete authenticity. All the moral fervor which scientific skepticism has released from religious control and then rendered homeless by discrediting its ideals returns then to imbue an amoral authenticity with intense moral approval. This is how absolute self-assertion,

¹⁴ On the Modern Mind," *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 144-146.

fantasies of gratuitous crime and perversity, self-hatred, and despair are aroused as defenses against a nagging suspicion of one's own honesty.¹⁵

In public life, Polanyi argues, moral inversion leads necessarily to totalitarianism.¹⁶ In public life the conflict between scepticism and perfectionism is overcome through the invention of mechanisms through which contradictory principles are explained away and protected from criticism (e.g. the Marxist explanation of historical development).¹⁷ In this working out, morality is denied explicitly, but an inverted morality is in fact embodied in the working of the machine. The morally inverted society, like the morally inverted person, substitutes material purposes for moral aims; moral passions are exercised "within a purely materialistic framework of purposes."¹⁸ That which is true and good is defined as whatever makes the machine run faster toward its ultimate destination, the utopian dream: morality, in effect, is made equivalent to expediency.

Polanyi's critique of the loss of universal and transcendent standards, the abandoning of tradition and the construction of ideological, secondary pseudo-realities

¹⁵ "On the Modern Mind," *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 145.

¹⁶ "On the Modern Mind," *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 146. Cf. "Why Did We Destroy Europe?" *Society, Economics and Philosophy*, 112-115. Because a discussion of moral inversion constitutes the bulk of the following chapter the following description will serve only to introduce the problem.

¹⁷ "On the Modern Mind," *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 146. Cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 214.

¹⁸ *Logic of Liberty*, 131.

forms but one half of his political understanding. For Polanyi, a diagnosis of these disorders is the first step in a project to re-discover a firmer ground upon which to establish a free and responsible society.¹⁹ The second step is a constructive response to these problems.

Polanyi's response leads him back to a consideration of the way science works in society, and how the position of science in society provides a prototype for understanding intellectual and political communities generally.²⁰ Polanyi's constructive response to the errors of the Enlightenment leads him to the formation of his own understanding of the way human beings exist and flourish in society, based on the development of his philosophical anthropology.

Polanyi, as we shall see, champions what he calls a free society rather than a Popperian "open" society or a society based on negative liberties. A free society is one

¹⁹ "On the Modern Mind," *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 147; "The Republic of Science: Its Political and Economic Theory," *Knowing and Being*, 69. In the latter essay, published originally in 1962, Polanyi makes the following remarks: "But have I not said that this movement [for the central direction of science and society] has virtually petered out by this time? ... Do we not hear the freedom and the independence of scientific inquiry openly demanded today even in important centres within the Soviet domain? Why renew this discussion when it seems about to lose its point? My answer is that you cannot base social wisdom on political disillusion. The more sober mood of public life today can be consolidated only if it is used as an opportunity for establishing the principles of a free society on firmer grounds." Understanding the problems associated with moral inversion is not enough. It is important that political critique be coupled with an alternative and constructive response.

²⁰ *The Contempt of Freedom: The Russian Experiment and After*. (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 11, 25-26.

that is “fully dedicated to a distinctive set of beliefs,” including, as I have already illustrated, a belief in a transcendent reality existing independently of the believer.²¹ Such a set of beliefs, Polanyi argues, constitutes the tacit, fiduciary commitment that groups of people in political communities share, and is made manifest in the shared beliefs and traditions that guide the development of a given community’s pursuit of a good society. A free society is a society in which liberty and responsibility are inextricably woven together.

The ‘Republic of Science’ and The Political Community.

My analysis of Polanyi’s treatment of political communities will entail a close reading of his essay, “The Republic of Science: Its Political and Economic Theory.” Other works will be consulted where they further develop the ideas presented there.²²

The positive or speculative thrust of Polanyi’s political thought is focussed on his conception of freedom. As I have already illustrated, the importance of freedom in Polanyi’s thought emerges as a response to the intellectual and political consequences of the Enlightenment. More specifically, however, the consequences against which Polanyi developed an opposing position took shape in the development of modern

²¹ *Logic of Liberty*, xviii. Cf. “On Liberalism and Liberty,” in *Society, Economics, and Philosophy*, 199-209.

²² Polanyi’s short essay, “The Autonomy of Science,” *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 15-33, provides a near identical account of his notion of the scientific community.

science and the self-understanding of modern scientific communities.²³ It is in contrast to this modern scientific self-understanding that Polanyi developed his theory of “The Republic of Science.”

The “Republic of Science” is the term Polanyi gives to the proper structure and function of scientific communities. This term is of central importance in Polanyi’s political thought. He writes in the opening paragraph to the essay:

My title is intended to suggest that the community of scientists is organized in a way which resembles certain features of a body politic and works according to economic principles similar to those by which the production of material goods is regulated. In the free co-operation of independent scientists we shall find a highly simplified model of a free society, which presents in isolation certain basic features of it that are more difficult to identify within the comprehensive functions of a national body.²⁴

The community of scientists, then, provides a prototype in Polanyi’s thought for the nature of communities in general, and political communities in particular.

The community of scientists, Polanyi maintains, is a community in which all

²³ *Tacit Dimension*, 70: “Modern science arose claiming to be grounded in experience and not on a metaphysics derived from first principles. ... My assertion that science can have discipline and originality only if it believes that the facts and values of science bear on a still unrevealed reality, stands in opposition to the current philosophic conception of scientific knowledge.”

²⁴ “The Republic of Science,” in *Knowing and Being*, 49.

members participate both in groups and individually in attempts at apprehending, understanding and existing within a given reality which the community believes can be revealed and substantially understood. The members of a scientific community cooperate “as members of a closely knit organization.” Their efforts are co-ordinated, Polanyi argues, by the “mutual adjustment of independent initiatives - of initiatives which are co-ordinated because each takes into account all the other initiatives operating within the same system.”²⁵ Individual members, and variously sized groups of members adjust their efforts to the results achieved by other members of the community. The outcome is an ever-changing and loose set of standards which form the traditions that bind the scientific community together. Furthermore, the transmission of the standards of science throughout the community is achieved only through the “medium of personal collaboration;” the scientist learns of, and becomes a part of an unfolding tradition as a participant in the research and discoveries that allow the governing standards to develop.²⁶

Polanyi provides a rather simple example of how such co-ordination best manifests itself in experience: the putting together of a large jigsaw puzzle by a group of people organized for that purpose. My analysis of Polanyi’s position will follow this example. Rather than separating out equal numbers of pieces to be worked on by the various

²⁵ “The Republic of Science,” in *Knowing and Being*, 49-50.

²⁶ “The Autonomy of Science,” in *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 21-23.

people individually and in isolation, or by providing each person with all the pieces of the puzzle to work on by him- or herself, the best method for the speedy completion of the task, Polanyi argues, is to allow the whole group to work on the same puzzle, each person working in sight of the others. “Under this system, each helper will act on his own initiative, by responding to the latest achievements of the others, and the completion of their joint task will be greatly accelerated.”²⁷ A co-ordination of efforts of this sort allows for the most proficient completion of the puzzle. When approaching the problem in this manner, Polanyi writes that the self-co-ordination of

independent initiatives are organized to a joint achievement by mutually adjusting themselves at every successive stage to the situation created by all others who are acting likewise.²⁸

Polanyi’s method of “co-ordination through mutual self-adjustment” provides for an efficient and successful achievement of such simple tasks as the completion of a jigsaw puzzle. I will illustrate how Polanyi’s position can be extended to the more complicated problems faced by scientific and political communities below.

In contrast, separating out equal numbers of pieces, or carefully delineated sections of the puzzle - assuming that that is something that can be achieved - to be worked on by the various helpers individually, may lead to undesirable impasses. One helper may

²⁷ “The Republic of Science,” in *Knowing and Being*, 50.

²⁸ “The Republic of Science,” in *Knowing and Being*, 50-51.

complete his section of the puzzle rather quickly while the other puzzle-makers lag behind, or worse, fail to complete their task altogether, resulting in an incomplete puzzle. Of course, where a simple puzzle is concerned, one would hope that even the very worst puzzle-makers would find the proper place for all the pieces. However, more difficult endeavours, for example, complex scientific pursuits, might prove impossible if approached using these methods. The egalitarian assumptions underlying this approach are not born out in experience. Not all members of a given community necessarily bring with them an equal amount of skill or experience to the task. Certain members of given communities are better at their pursuits than others.

A similar problem emerges when an exact replica of the puzzle is given to the various puzzle-makers individually and in isolation. While it is quite probable that one of the community's members will complete the task eventually, the efforts of those who finish later, or fail to complete the puzzle altogether, are either redundant or wasted. A considerable amount of unnecessary effort is expended using such a method. But the problem is far worse when the task is not as simple as puzzle-making. In scientific research, palpable results in the form of discoveries or the increased understanding of a given problem rest with the hope that one isolated member of the community will have the where-with-all to achieve such results. All hopes reside with the possibility of individual genius. This approach is premised on a rather firm individualistic understanding of the role of the members of a community, working toward a jointly desired end. The notion of collaborative effort is almost entirely absent. Even in the

simple task of puzzle-making, such isolationism appears counter-productive.²⁹

The coordination of independent initiatives that Polanyi deems necessary for the smooth and beneficial functioning of scientific communities is in large part absent from the two preceding methods of community organization. The former approach treats the community members in too mechanistic a fashion, allowing them to collaborate in only a very particular way and in strictly egalitarian fashion. The participants are treated more like the parts of a machine than individual human beings with differing levels of skill and talent to offer to the community's projects. In the latter approach the community members are discouraged from working as anything other than independent individuals with the minimum of collaborative effort. The very notion of community is absent in such an organizational model.

While Polanyi's choice of example may seem rather trite, the complexities of his position emerge through its application. When we move from the treatment of scientific communities to larger political communities it becomes clear that the example chosen by Polanyi to contrast varieties of community organization is particularly enlightening. It highlights the importance of the delicate balance between individual difference and group coordination in the functioning of a given community, while at the same time suggesting the potentially detrimental effects of structural impositions on a given reality of circumstances. Similarly, Polanyi's example illustrates

²⁹ See also, "The Autonomy of Science," in *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 19.

how central direction, an abstract or rigid understanding of equality and individuality, and a failure to account for the role of talent and intuition in human endeavours all contribute to the wider problems associated with the imposition of an ideologically constructed understanding of inter-personal affairs on a community. Furthermore, Polanyi's example provides a stark contrast between constructed and imposed practical standards and those that develop as part of an unfolding tradition within a community. This contrast is perhaps best understood as one between controlled and directed, and organic and dynamic standards and communities.

The importance of the lack of detached direction is crucial in Polanyi's analysis, especially where it relates to the realm of politics. He is careful to note that the self-coordination of independent initiatives must remain "unpremeditated."³⁰ This is because the end result of the search is as yet unknown, and each helper must be allowed, with a certain degree of freedom, to watch for new opportunities for advancement. Without a firm grasp on the specifics of the desired outcome, a specific or directed course of action is unwarranted; rather, a loose and unpremeditated directive power is in order: one that can be manipulated to account for advances and false steps in the community's

³⁰ He argues, "Central direction would, in effect, paralyse their (the participants) cooperation." Moreover, he argues, "Any authority which would undertake to direct the work of the scientist centrally would bring the progress of science virtually to a standstill." "The Republic of Science," in *Knowing and Being*, 51. Cf. Polanyi's treatment of supervision in totalitarian regimes in *The Contempt of Freedom*, 35-60. See also *Logic of Liberty*, 243-244, and "The Rights and Duties of Science," in *Society, Economics, and Philosophy*, 61-77

projects. Polanyi writes,

the effectiveness of a group of helpers [in the majority of cases] will then exceed that of any isolated member, to the extent to which some member of the group will always discover a new chance for adding a piece to the puzzle more quickly than any one isolated person could have done by himself.³¹

To organize or plan the course of action taken by the group by way of some central, single authority would impair the ability of the various members to undertake independent initiatives, and thereby reduce their combined effectiveness. Instead, a governing system of co-ordination by mutual self-adjustment is required. Such a system is developed through the free interaction of the various members - be they puzzle makers, scientists or citizens - and directed only by a “common dedication of its participants” to the value of certain necessary principles, such as honesty, objectivity and a recognition of the limitations imposed by the nature of reality.³² Polanyi describes such a governing system as a “*spontaneous order*,” in opposition to central direction or a “*corporate order*.”³³ The importance of the distinction between the spontaneous and corporate order is clear. The former, while certainly a product of human action, is not,

³¹ “The Republic of Science,” in *Knowing and Being*, 51.

³² *The Logic of Liberty*, 189-196. Cf. *Meaning*, 204-210

³³ *Meaning*, 204.

like the latter, the product of human design.³⁴ Spontaneous orders are not imposed on reality, but rather develop through an active participation in reality. They reflect an organic and dynamic rather than a rigid and imposed governing system.

When organized in a spontaneous order developed freely by means of mutual adjustments, we find that each puzzle-maker acts on individual initiative while submitting to the obligations of the traditional standards of the pursuit. In other words, the free initiative of the individual puzzle-maker is exercised while submitting to the impersonal obligations of the traditional authority. The freedom of the individual is never complete. In the case of puzzle-making, the standards are rather simple and obvious. For example, it would be inappropriate to force two pieces together that do not match. Similarly, cutting pieces to fit would contravene the standards of the pursuit. In science, the situation is somewhat more complicated, and the standards less firmly and explicitly established.

Self-government, in opposition to central direction, requires a freedom that is not entirely wholesale. Rather, it requires a freedom that is constrained by the obligations affirmed through an organic set of organizational standards.³⁵ The situation is summed up well by Allen:

the community of scientists ... aims at self-improvement by means of free

³⁴ Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 185.

³⁵ "The Nature of Scientific Convictions," in *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 62-63.

mutual adjustment and a general authority upholding a ‘dynamic orthodoxy’ of traditional standards yet encouraging originality.³⁶

Here the theoretical side of Polanyi’s epistemological insights are reflected in their existential location. The freedom of the community of scientists to do as they please is enframed by a responsibility to uphold the dynamic standards developed over time.³⁷ The standards that govern community actions are an orthodoxy in so far as they set limits and account for the traditions of the community’s pursuits. They are dynamic where they reflect the effects of the heuristic achievements in the search for knowledge. In other words, new discoveries encourage the dynamic quality of the standards of the ruling orthodoxy. Traditions, then, provide the ultimate standards for truth only in so far as they allow for the incorporation of knowledge revealed in heuristic moments.³⁸ A tradition in and of itself does not provide an ultimate standard for truth. The importance of this point is greatly magnified in the realm of politics.

³⁶ Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 157.

³⁷ Recall Polanyi’s important statement quoted earlier: “*The freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to do as he must.*” *Personal Knowledge*, 309.

³⁸ The best account of Polanyi’s “heuristic philosophy” is in Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery*, 83-110.

Freedom, Authority and Polanyi's Conservatism.

Polanyi's understanding of freedom develops from the basis of his understanding of community in the "Republic of Science." And while he admits that the community of scientists does not provide a complete model for the larger political community, it does present certain of its fundamental constituents in some detail.³⁹ First and foremost, the community of scientists, and all other intellectual and political communities exist within, and attempt to understand a given reality that is fundamentally unalterable. This is most obvious in the case of scientific communities, but no less true for the community of historians or sociologists, or for political society in general. Second, in non-scientific as well as scientific communities a deeper understanding of the pursuits of the community is gained through a process of indwelling and apprenticeship and advances in pursuits are marshalled by the authority of the dynamic traditions of the community. Again, in the case of science, this process is easily understood. It becomes somewhat more complicated in political life.

Political freedom, for Polanyi, entails "an openness to being and the ability to participate in its realization."⁴⁰ This openness emerges in the pursuit of intellectual and moral knowledge of good political order achieved through indwelling in the world. Recognition of limitations erected as standards of authority in political organization

³⁹ "The Republic of Science," in *Knowing and Being*, 49.

⁴⁰ James Wiser, "Knowledge and Order," *Political Science Reviewer* 7 (1977), 110.

develops through the transmission of a body of inter-personal coherent ideas.⁴¹ A free political community can exist, therefore, only within the context of a commitment to a tradition of values achieved through a commonly accepted authority. Political knowledge, like scientific knowledge, cannot be subjective. Political action, or rather political freedom, must respect the standards of given and pre-existing obligations. As in the ideal scientific community, the free political community is a “society of explorers,”⁴² working under a mutually imposed objective authority. A free society, in the passionate pursuit of self-improvement, rejects absolute self-determination both individually and collectively. It demands that freedom be rooted in tradition and at the same time that it cultivate the promotion of its self-improvement. Thus, a free society is neither characterized by, nor justified on the basis of its respect for authority, but rather by its belief in transcendent ideals and an underlying reality. Traditions are affirmed only when they are in accord with the revealed order of being.

Characterizations of Polanyi’s political thought as conservative emphasize his ideas on the relationship between freedom and authority. While this is not an unwarranted characterization, its usual presentation tends to blur the full complexity of Polanyi’s political philosophy. An understanding of tradition plays a crucial role in Polanyi’s politics; however, too much significance has been attributed to it, and it has

⁴¹ *Logic of Liberty*, 46.

⁴² *Tacit Dimension*, 83.

been ascribed an unmerited prescriptive quality. Accounts of Polanyi's conservatism, therefore, have been elaborated in ways contrary to the whole of Polanyi's account.

Allen's conception of Polanyi's conservatism in *Beyond Liberalism* is a good example of this problem. Allen highlights aspects of Polanyi's political thought to emphasize its conservative character. He concentrates in particular on Polanyi's argument that the progress of knowledge best develops under the loose control of the traditional authority and standards of the community. While Allen is correct in highlighting the importance of tradition in Polanyi's philosophy, his attempts to extend the significance of the implications he derives from the political aspects of Polanyi's work lead Allen to misrepresent the overall character of Polanyi's thought and result in an ideological interpretation of its political elements. This problem emerges whenever Allen attempts to develop a 'Polanyian' response to a particular practical political problem. As noted earlier, Allen's arguments concerning immigration provide an important example. He writes:

It did no good to American liberties to allow the immigration of large numbers of Sicilians and with them the Mafia, and European liberties would not last for long if a massive wave of Islamic Arab immigration from North Africa were permitted. A free society must close itself against groups who do not value its liberties, because freedom depends on common

commitments.⁴³

Moreover, Allen maintains that

‘Multiculturalism’ is a policy of denying the freedom to be oneself. Any people, surely, has a right to be itself, and to protect its traditional way of life. Where very different communities exist side by side, there are often grave problems and violent conflicts and a lack of a common framework peaceably to settle them. Prudence, and the preservation of freedom, suggests that mass immigration be carefully controlled if allowed at all.⁴⁴

Such an explicit policy on immigration is nowhere to be found in Polanyi’s writings. Nowhere does Polanyi suggest that a society should close itself off from the outside world. While Polanyi affirms the importance of shared moral and intellectual passions transmitted as cultural and political obligations in the form of moral and intellectual standards,⁴⁵ his recognition of the importance of originality for the advance of knowledge of the world would seem to suggest an openness to novelty. After all, commitment to a passion for a true understanding of the order of existence supercedes the requirements of tradition. Polanyi’s defence of traditions, political or otherwise, is never employed as a substitute for critical reflection and careful analysis of all that

⁴³ Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 183.

⁴⁴ Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 183.

⁴⁵ *Personal Knowledge*, 212-213.

might improve the life and knowledge of humankind. While Polanyi's free society depends on the acceptance of common commitments to traditional standards, it is bettered only when the higher duty to the order of reality is pursued passionately, and sometimes radically.

Allen's divergence from the tenor of Polanyi's work is perhaps a result of an unwillingness to accept Polanyi's own statements regarding the limits of his conservatism. Both Allen and Brownhill insist on classifying Polanyi's political thought as distinctly Burkean.⁴⁶ They do this even though Polanyi distanced himself from Burke explicitly. Polanyi argued that his understanding of a free society transcended the conflict between Edmund Burke and Tom Paine:

It rejects Paine's demand for the absolute self-determination of each generation, but it does so for the sake of its own ideal of unlimited human and social improvement. It accepts Burke's thesis that freedom must be rooted in tradition, but transposes it into a system cultivating radical progress.⁴⁷

Polanyi's "conservatism" is present in a free society in which

both its liberties and its servitudes are determined by its striving for self improvement, which in its turn is determined by the intimations of truths yet

⁴⁶ Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 2, 10-11; Brownhill, "Freedom and Authority," 163.

⁴⁷ "The Republic of Science," in *Knowing and Being*, 71.

to be revealed, calling on men to reveal them.⁴⁸

Traditional authority, tempered by a commitment to reality forms the underlying structure of Polanyi's political philosophy.

⁴⁸ "The Republic of Science," in *Knowing and Being*, 70-71.

Chapter 3: Polanyi's Critique of Ideology

Introductory Remarks.

In the preceding chapter, I suggested that those scholars who present Polanyi's 'conservatism' in such a way as to argue for a specific and programmatic conservative political position misrepresent Polanyi's political thought and force the 'conservative' elements of his work into a rigid ideological position. In contrast, I sketched a competing viewpoint that presents Polanyi's 'conservatism' as something quite different entirely. I argued that, given the basic features of Polanyi's ontological and epistemological position, an ideological conservatism in politics is impossible for him. I maintained that Polanyi's 'conservative' thought developed not as a reaction to the problems in the world of practical politics, but rather emerged as a consequence of a more generalized approach to the study of man; it emerged as a result of Polanyi's philosophical anthropology. I argued that Polanyi's 'conservatism' is more accurately described as a manifestation of a philosophical and scientific prudence applied to the realm of politics, and emanates not from reactive impulses, but from a careful and circumspective philosophical analysis of modernity and the sources of modern problems. Polanyi's 'conservative politics' is not developed to combat ideological politics of a different type on ideological grounds. Polanyi's politics can be described as 'conservative' only in so far as it is reflective of an attempt at an objective approach

to the study of man, and guided at all times by a philosophical prudence.

Thus, contrary to the positions of Allen, and to a lesser extent Brownhill, I suggested that Polanyi's 'conservatism' has more affinities with the thought of philosophical critics of modernity such as Eric Voegelin than with the ideas of the intellectual fathers of modern western conservative parties.¹ As a consequence, I maintained that Polanyi's 'conservatism' must be regarded as a feature of his greater critical position concerning modernity, in particular as a critique of ideological constructs, rather than as a positive or programmatic political position.

I would argue that my presentation of Polanyi's thought in the first chapter of this thesis is indicative of this direction of interpretation. A more sustained analysis of Polanyi's explicit treatment of politics, however, will clearly illustrate the problems inherent in the increasingly common interpretations. More importantly, it will provide an accurate account of the foundations for Polanyi's political position and encourage a greater sensitivity to the complexities of Polanyi's political thought.

My focus in this chapter, then, will be on Polanyi's critique of intellectual and political movements in the twentieth century. Because I intend to highlight the

¹ This is not to suggest that Polanyi's political thought is in total opposition to the modern political conservatism espoused by Allen. Allen's position does highlight aspects of Polanyi's political understanding. His focus, however, and his wish to present Polanyi as a defender of a very particular conservative political platform neglects what I believe to be the fundamental quality of Polanyi's political critique. Polanyi's disdain for ideological activism, which emerges in his critiques of scientism, Marxism, fascism, and even certain forms of liberalism, underlies all extensions of his philosophy to the political realm.

treatment of ideology developed in these critiques, I begin with a thorough analysis of the problem of ideology and ideological or activist approaches to politics. I continue with a detailed analysis of Polanyi's critique of political ideologies, in particular his treatment of "moral inversion" in Marxism as the source of ideological activism, and I illustrate how this critique can be extended to include other political and intellectual ideologies. I conclude by relating these critiques, as well as Polanyi's alternatives, to his alleged 'conservatism,' and thereby provide a firm basis for rejecting Allen's interpretive extensions.

The Problem of Ideology and Ideological Activism

In this section I provide a brief description of the problem of ideology and ideological activism in politics, and juxtapose this to Polanyi's non-ideological understanding of man and society.

In contemporary political debates it is common for those involved to slot themselves into the "ideological spectrum" somewhere between the far right and the far left. It has become difficult to imagine an account of political perspectives that is not ideologically oriented. For instance, a person who defends traditional political arrangements and considers drastic societal changes with circumspection is, as a matter of course, said to be "on the right" - ideologically speaking, a conservative. Conversely, someone who actively pursues change, and generates scathing critiques of the political

status quo is almost universally acclaimed a defender of the left. While this may appear to be a necessary distinguishing structure for the analysis of political arguments, it is in fact a decidedly modern approach to the subject, and has come to dominate political discourse only in the last two hundred years. Furthermore, the reduction of political arguments to categorically different ideological positions can result in the misrepresentation of the thought of a great many political thinkers. Polanyi, for instance, depending on which aspect of his thought is considered, could be slotted almost anywhere in the ideological spectrum. Unless we assume that Polanyi and other thinkers like him were grossly inconsistent in the quality of their argumentation, we are left to assume that ideological pigeon-holing is an inappropriate organizational tool. Not all political thought is ideological.

My interest in this thesis is to defend the claim that Polanyi's 'conservatism' is fundamentally anti-ideological and furthermore, that his political position develops through a critique of ideology. It is important, therefore, that I begin this chapter with a detailed account of the problem of ideology and ideological activism. This will provide a firm basis for understanding the social and political problems Polanyi was attempting to overcome in his critical writings. And it is doubly necessary due to the inadequate language available for speaking of the opposite of ideological thinking on its own.²

² As Gerhart Niemeyer writes: "Unfortunately there is not yet any language to identify the opposite of the thoughts and movements of total destruction. The

Ideology is, to state it simply, a perverted account of political life that merges a distorted understanding of theoretical knowledge with practical application, in which humankind's ability to make or create a world in the image of his own choosing is the supreme goal. An ideological politics is one in which theory and action have been supplanted by making, in which politics is understood to be a *techne*. Thus, Dante Germino writes,

Ideological thought in its most radical form is the converse of authentic political theory. Where theory is open to various dimensions of experience, ideology is the enemy of all openness, having reduced experience to the single dimension of *homo faber* and his needs.³

word 'philo-sophical' sometimes heard as the antonym of 'ideological,' is adequate as far as it goes, because it connotes theory, contemplation born of the love of truth rather than of the will to power. The term, however, is confined to the *noesis* of the Platonic-Aristotelian type and thus leaves out thoughts and attitudes about reality that are shaped by the myth and which likewise must be considered the opposite of 'ideology'." Niemeyer goes on to suggest that the term "philo-ontic" is needed in addition to "philo-sophic" to cover the mythical symbolization of reality and stand in opposition to the antinomianism and espousal of alienation from the world in ideological thought. While I am unsure as to whether this latter part is not captured in the Platonic-Aristotelian conception of "philo-sophical," Niemeyer's original point stands, because the term "philosophy" has come to represent far more than the opposite of ideology for the modern mind. See Gerhart Niemeyer, *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 142-143. See also Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, (Washington: Regnery, 1997), 70.

³ Dante Germino, *Beyond Ideology: The Revival of Political Theory*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 45-46. Both Germino and Niemeyer's accounts of the problem of ideology are greatly influenced by Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). C.f.

This single-mindedness in politics fostered by the ideologue is both a source for, and the result of, an impoverished understanding of the life of humankind. Rejected is the Aristotelean tripartite distinction between theoretical, practical and productive knowledge and their relevance to the corresponding realms of human life. For modern man, theory no longer represents active contemplation - the life of the philosopher - but rather implies an ability to develop intellectual abstractions.⁴ Theoretical understanding is made subordinate to the demands of practical, and especially productive life.

There are obvious consequences to the reductionism of ideological thought, not the least of which is the loss of both moral and existential limitations as the grounds for establishing political order. For the ideologue, all traditional behavioral restrictions premised on an understanding of human relations in conflict with the chosen ideology are viewed as legitimately transgressed, and are disregarded. Man's supreme ability to create the moral and political order of his choosing implies not only the possibility of a variety of future constructions, but, when read back into history, denies any necessity to, or transcendent source for, traditional systems of order. The most dangerous

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973), 468-472.

⁴ A very learned and useful account of both the ancient and modern views on the differences between theoretical, practical and productive knowledge can be found in Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a concept from Aristotle to Marx*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967). Aristotle introduces this tripartite categorization in *Nicomachean Ethics* (I. 5; 1095b14-1096a6).

implication of this line of reasoning suggests that, as the source of his own limitations, ideological man may choose to fabricate no limitations at all.⁵ Parenthetically, the political ideologue thus loses his status as an interpreter of the human condition and the grounds for good or right political order. He becomes, rather, a draughtsman who elaborates the blueprints for the revolutionary fabrication of a new order. Instead of the political thinker as reflective interpreter of political reality, we are left with the ideologue as programmatic applicator of a dream for the future.⁶

Political and intellectual ideologies, then, make certain spiritual and intellectual demands of the ideologue and ideological activist. As I have illustrated, the ideologue must reject both traditionally accepted limitations and the limitations inherent in the given world of experience. This rejection of limitations develops in two similar general directions. Niemeyer writes:

⁵ This nihilistic aspect of ideological thought is captured by Dostoevsky in Kirillov's account of his 'ideological epiphany' to Stavrogin in *Devils*:

"Everything is good ... Man is unhappy because he doesn't know he's happy; that's the only reason. That's all! He who knows becomes happy at once, that very moment. The mother-in-law will die, but the little girl will remain - that's good. I discovered it all of a sudden."

"But what about a person who's starving to death or who abuses a little girl - is that good?"

"Yes, it is. And if someone blows his brains out for that child, that's good, too; and if he doesn't blow his brains out, that's also good. Everything is good, everything. It's good for all those who know it's good. If they knew it was good, it'd be good; but as long as they don't know it's good, it isn't good. That's my entire idea, the whole thing; there isn't any more!" Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Devils*, M. R. Katz, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 250.

⁶ Germino, *Beyond Ideology*, 46.

the reality of the given world of experience can be denied either axiologically or teleologically. The axiological denial radically opposes goodness to the historical world by envisaging a good wholly alien to both past and present society, as well as a given society wholly alien to goodness, so that man's historical existence is seen as essentially separated from his true reality. The teleological denial contracts meaningful time wholly into the future, withholding the attributes of reality from both past and present, so that neither past nor present is embraced as "ours," but the future alone is.⁷

Furthermore,

Axiologically speaking, political practice is changed from 'acting' to 'making' ... Teleologically speaking, political practice is switched from the time dimension of the present - the contemporaneity of one's fellow beings - to the dimension of the 'period of transition' in which all actions lose their character of choices and take on that of the making of a preknown future.⁸

While such axiological and teleological political movements are similar, the differences in the historical character of each type are important to recognize. An ideological activist of the former type is engaged in an attempt to remove man from a present

⁷ Niemeyer, *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, 140-141.

⁸ Niemeyer, *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, 141.

reality in which he is alienated and imperfect, and ferry him to an extra-historical, other-worldly paradise. Only the latter type is concerned with working toward an imminent future of perfection. Niemeyer is careful to point out that the teleological form of ideological activism is the dominant brand of ideology in modernity. Twentieth century Marxist and fascist movements provide ample empirical evidence for this contention.

Niemeyer's Voegelinian formulation captures well the nature of the problem of the ideological "eclipsing" of reality:

The term 'ideological' refers to the subordination of contemplative theory to the *libido dominandi*, which manifests itself in the building of closed systems around dogmatically willed 'positions,' in reduction of both scope and materials of analysis, and in the determination to substitute an intellectually fabricated 'Second Reality' for the reality given to man.⁹

Such substitutions are indicative of an intellectual loss in the sense of a reduced range of the accepted varieties of knowledge and of man's ability to reflect upon his experience, and a spiritual loss in the sense of a denial of transcendent sources of order and the givenness of reality.

When man's political understanding is dominated by ideological activism, much

⁹ Niemeyer, *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, 141-142. I would like to thank Dr. M. W. Poirier of Concordia University for bringing this definition to my attention.

is lost. Gone is the recognition of a given reality. Gone are the contemplative and political approaches to knowledge of the world of humankind. The political thinker engaged in reflective criticism of the world he inhabits is replaced by the ideologue who either fabricates the world of his dreams or becomes an administrator of the activist dreaming of others. In the end what is lost is “every possibility of transcending the dimension of practical-productive activity and arriving at a critical theory of politics.”¹⁰

Moral Inversion and Polanyi’s Critique of Ideological Activism

If we accept the characterization of ideological activism as a problem, and consequently something to be overcome, we are faced with the task of determining the sources of the malaise. Eric Voegelin, borrowing a term ostensibly coined by Schelling, claims that the ideological thinker suffers from a “pneumopathological” condition. “Pneumopathology” is the condition of “a thinker who, in his revolt against the world as it has been created by God, arbitrarily omits an element of reality in order to create the fantasy of a new world.”¹¹ The problem, for Voegelin, develops at the psychological level. He argues that the psychic gain achieved by the ideologue and his political

¹⁰ Germino, *Beyond Ideology*, 47.

¹¹ Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 70. Voegelin also suggests that the problem persists due to a phenomenon of “intellectual dishonesty.” Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, E. Sandoz, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 45-46. It is interesting to note that on one occasion Polanyi describes the problem of ideology as fueled by “pathological morality.” “Beyond Nihilism,” in *Knowing and Being*, 18.

followers consists in the satisfaction of a desire for certainty in personal and societal human existence. A created future is a future that can be known in all its complexity. Through a fabricated political order, humankind thus attempts to alleviate its fears of the unknown. The ancient experiences of trust and faith that sustained the psyche are unacceptable to the modern ideologue, who demands an objectivist scientific account of existence. It is the conflict between uncertainty and the modern demand for explicitness that forms the “ontic roots” of the ideological phenomenon.¹²

In Polanyi’s account, although it is stated somewhat differently, there is a similar recognition of a spiritual and intellectual disorder at the heart of ideological activism. Polanyi maintains that ideological activism has the inverted expression of moral passions as its source. He argues that the demands of modern scientific and intellectual prejudices force a rejection of traditional moral standards. Modern man replaces these standards with the false expression of moral passions; and this, in turn, encourages a moral inversion that fuels ideological activism.

Polanyi’s conception of morality develops as an extension of his theory of commitment. The moral act, Polanyi argues, is one pursued in accordance with a relationship of personal commitment to the world. Moreover, this relationship of commitment demands attempts at acting in accordance with the given order of reality, and an acceptance of a resulting obligation which guides human conscience. Right

¹² Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 74-78.

moral action, like properly directed intellectual passion, is the result of a communication with the source or sources of humankind's personal, cultural and social purposes.¹³ Moral knowledge requires the embracing of the given world and the attempt to acquire and uphold that knowledge through dwelling in the world.¹⁴

Like intellectual valuations, moral judgments are appraisals of the given world. Polanyi states: "the thirst for righteousness has the same capacity for satisfying itself by enriching the world that is proper to intellectual passions."¹⁵ Moral judgements are different from intellectual valuations, however, in a very important and consequential manner. Polanyi argues that they cut much deeper than their intellectual counterparts, and as such are more difficult to purge. He writes:

A man may be consumed by an intellectual passion; he may be a man of genius, yet be also sycophantic, vain, envious and spiteful. Though a prince of letters, he would be a despicable person. For men are valued as men according to their moral force; and the outcome of our moral striving is assessed, not as the success or failure of any external performance of ours, but by its effect on our whole person. Accordingly, moral rules control our whole selves rather than the exercise of our faculties, and to comply with a

¹³ *Science, Faith and Society*, 83-84. Polanyi's explanation of how one distinguishes right moral action is treated below.

¹⁴ "On the Modern Mind" in *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, 148-149.

¹⁵ *Personal Knowledge*, 214.

code of morality, custom and law, is to live by it in a far more comprehensive sense than is involved in observing certain scientific and artistic standards.¹⁶

Moral rules, therefore, have greater political significance. They are instruments of political power in so far as morality is linked to the development of tradition, custom and law.

Under the rule of objectivist standards of truth, the genuineness of traditional moral standards is rendered suspect. The result is a loss of the autonomy of morality and a corresponding understanding of morals as constructions reflective of the self-interest of a ruling elite. The ideological espousal of scientific objectivism demands an ideological interpretation and treatment of moral rules, and by extension, a firm rejection of traditional morality as subjective, unscientific prejudice. What emerges is a combination of the denial of the standards and ideals of morality and a reconstituted, veiled moral passion, a combination that Polanyi terms a “dynamo-objective coupling.”¹⁷ Marxism, for example, in denying traditional morality any intrinsic force, appeals to a different - albeit perverted - moral passion fueled by scientific materialism.

In Marxism

we are presented with an analysis of bourgeois ideals in terms of immanent

¹⁶ *Personal Knowledge*, 214-215.

¹⁷ *Personal Knowledge*, 230.

bourgeois interests, and because the hidden motivation of this analysis is a condemnation of capitalism, the analysis turns into an *unmasking* of bourgeois hypocrisy. Since this analysis of moral claims in terms of material interests applies quite generally, it might be thought to discredit also the moral motives of those who do the unmasking. But these motives are safe against unmasking, since they remain undeclared. Indeed, acting through the unmasking of bourgeois ideologies, they arouse powerful moral passions in others - without ever pronouncing any moral judgement. Their propagandistic effect is achieved precisely by enunciating the unmasking in purely scientific terms, which are thus immune against suspicion of a moralizing purpose.¹⁸

This “dynamo-objective coupling” is potent in its self-defense: any attempt to critique its scientific merits is rebutted by claiming that moral passions have illegitimately motivated the critique; any attempt to object based on moral grounds is rejected “by invoking the inexorable verdict of its scientific findings.”¹⁹

In Marxism there is a fusion of scientific objectivism with intense moral passions in the shape of an acceptance of historical materialism and the moral passion that fuels its utopian outlook. The moral impetus remains hidden due to this powerful “moral

¹⁸ *Personal Knowledge*, 230.

¹⁹ *Personal Knowledge*, 230.

inversion.”²⁰ Moral inversion, according to Polanyi, entails an attempt at understanding human experience without making reference to its moral dimensions, but all the while depending on the driving force of veiled moral passions. Such a condition is possible where transcendent or extra-personal values and the givenness of the world inhabited by humankind are denied justification. This denial, in combination with the dominant influence of objectivist skepticism, prepared the modern mind for the ideological activism of the twentieth century. The ideologue, then, according to Polanyi, engages in a substitution of material purposes for moral aims in the name of scientific verity; and, “he acts with the whole force of his homeless moral passions within a purely materialistic framework of purposes.”²¹

Marxism is only one example of the problem of moral inversion. All mass movements premised on an ideological interpretation of political life display similar features. For example, fascistic movements, and in particular Naziism, passionately defend a utilitarianism born of nihilism and racial “science.” In Naziism, patriotism devolves into support for a perceived duty to the fulfillment of “historic destiny”

²⁰ Polanyi’s earliest description of the problem is in *Science, Faith and Society*, 77-78. The first use of the term “moral inversion” is found in *Logic of Liberty*, 131: “The morally inverted person has not merely performed a philosophic substitution of moral aims by material purposes, but is acting with the whole force of his homeless moral passions within a purely materialistic framework of purposes.” Cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 231-235; *Tacit Dimension*, 4, 85-86; “Beyond Nihilism,” in *Knowing and Being*, 14-22; “Why Did We Destroy Europe?” in *Society, Economics, Philosophy*, 113-115; *Meaning*, 17-18.

²¹ *Logic of Liberty*, 131.

regardless of moral obligations. Moral objections to immoral practices in support of that historic destiny are considered treasonable; and yet such immoral practices are pursued with great moral passion. The “dynamo-objective coupling” thus emerges in a “disgust for moralizing objectors” coupled with a “moral passion for unscrupulous violence” in support of national historic destiny.²²

In much of his work, Polanyi’s treatment of political ideologies begins and ends with a consideration of totalitarian movements; however, there is evidence that Polanyi thought that the many varieties of Western liberalism had similar ideological problems. After all, scientific objectivism continues to underlie much in the modern western world view, both implicitly and explicitly. The language of scientific or historical necessity, while perhaps less clearly enunciated, is also not absent in liberalism. The varieties of western liberalism are therefore as susceptible to the moral inversion resulting from a deep-seated scientific skepticism as their totalitarian counterparts. The problem of moral inversion and its existential aftermath is not only a problem emerging in totalitarian political regimes. Polanyi states that, through moral inversion, “fascism ... converted patriotism into a cult of brutality, even as Marx converted utopianism into science. Our age is racked by the fanaticism of unbelievers.”²³ Skepticism with regard to traditional morals is encouraged by moral passions for value-free standards, and these

²² *Personal Knowledge*, 232. Cf. *Meaning*, 205.

²³ *Meaning*, 28.

passions are common in liberal societies.

The political consequences of liberal moral inversion tend to develop less destructive results. Polanyi, therefore, chooses to categorize them somewhat differently. While moral inversion is still in evidence, he distinguishes liberal ideologies as “spurious” examples of the phenomenon. He describes utilitarianism as follows:

A utilitarian interpretation of morality accuses all moral sentiments of hypocrisy, while the moral indignation which the writer thus expresses is safely disguised as a scientific statement. And on other occasions, these concealed moral passions reassert themselves, affirming ethical ideals either backhandedly as a tight-lipped praise of social dissenters, or else disguised in utilitarian terms.²⁴

While the specifics of the coupling are different than in the previous examples, the fundamental quality of the inversion is the same, both in utilitarianism and in other varieties of liberal political theory. Why then are the liberal versions of the problem considered “spurious”? They certainly emanate from the same psychological source, but what makes them different is that they tend to lack the violent revolutionary quality of totalitarian ideologies. Furthermore, liberal political ideologies have historically accepted a vague, unfolding and unfulfilled *telos*. The liberal experience of scientific

²⁴ *Personal Knowledge*, 233.

skepticism has, for the most part, been tempered by the “suspended logic” of liberalism.²⁵ In other words, the logical consequences of the modern moral inversion are in very important ways suspended in favour of an “illogical” course of action, usually in the form of an upholding of traditional, albeit conflicting, standards of morality.

Due to the strength of certain traditions in Western society, Polanyi maintains, the consummation of the destructive forces of moral inversion was prevented. Anglo-American liberal traditions in particular encouraged “an instinctive reluctance to pursue the accepted philosophic premises to their ultimate conclusions.”²⁶ The speculative restraint in evidence in Anglo-American liberalism was the product of competing moral forces that had become entrenched in the political culture before Europe succumbed to the skepticism of the early modern era. Polanyi suggests that the revolutionary upheavals experienced by France were born of the French Enlightenment, which imposed no restraint on skeptical speculation.²⁷ Contrary to the Anglo-American experience in which conflicting support for religious and political tolerance was allowed to exist alongside objectivist epistemological truth claims, in France traditional values suffered the full force of an unyielding scientific skepticism. The logical

²⁵ *Science, Faith and Society*, 76-77.

²⁶ *Logic of Liberty*, 121.

²⁷ *Logic of Liberty*, 123.

inconsistency of Anglo-American liberalism saved the Anglo-American world from the kind of destruction resulting from complete moral inversion.

This aspect of Polanyi's political critique is of fundamental importance. Any claims regarding Polanyi's support for liberalism, even a liberalism of a conservative nature, must be qualified with reference to his ideological critique. Polanyi is at all times aware of the danger of supporting even the most reflective forms of liberalism because of the tenuous quality of the spurious moral inversion; nothing necessarily prevents the devolution from spurious to fully realized moral inversion. This caution is expressed in the following passage:

it is dangerous to rely on it that men will continue indefinitely to pursue their moral ideals within a system of thought which denies reality to them.

Not because they might lose their ideals ... but because they might slip into the logically stabler state of complete moral inversion.²⁸

Polanyi maintains that suspended logic need not last indefinitely: human beings will either move forward and act upon their ideological constructions or else revise their ideological premises and overcome conflicting traditional standards.

When Polanyi defends various aspects of liberalism, developing the conception of a free society that many contend closely resembles the regime favoured by conservative liberals, he is not attempting to situate himself among the ideological

²⁸ *Personal Knowledge*, 234. Cf. *Meaning*, 11-12.

constructs of modern opinion. The affinities of his political thought with a classically conservative conception of liberty are at all times subordinate to his claim that “the whole purpose of society lies in enabling its members to pursue their transcendent obligations; particularly to truth, justice and charity.”²⁹ There is no suggestion of support for the ideological purpose of any form of liberalism in Polanyi’s writings.

The conservative liberalism espoused by Allen, and suggested as the only logical political extension of Polanyi’s thought, is but one example of what Polanyi considered an inexhaustible list of possible non-ideological alternatives.³⁰ His interest in examining the possibility of a renewal of traditional values is as strong as his insistence on the possibility of wholly new accounts. While Allen pays lip-service to this aspect of Polanyi’s argument,³¹ he has chosen to defend, in Polanyi’s name, only one possibility. He supports an interpretation of Polanyi’s political thought that inverts the hierarchy of passionate commitment to the transcendent source of order and the values of traditional standards of authority.

²⁹ *Science, Faith and Society*, 83.

³⁰ “A Postscript,” in *Society, Economics, Philosophy*, 103.

³¹ Allen, *Beyond Liberalism*, 240-241.

Polanyi's Political Science

It is necessary for some attention to be given to the tools for analyzing political movements and regimes developed by Polanyi because they provide some insight into the nature of a political order that Polanyi might support. Polanyi's approach to the analysis of politics begins with certain basic presuppositions. He argues that social reality can be understood only in reference to moral values. Furthermore, the search for truth and a proper understanding of man and society presupposes the value of finding it. Polanyi maintains that all studies of politics that seek an understanding of the nature of man's political experiences must begin with reference to individual and group human experience and, more specifically, human moral experience.

Polanyi develops his argument as follows:

(1) All men, whatever their professions, make moral judgements. (2) When we claim that an action of ours is prompted by moral motives, or else when we make moral judgments of others ... we invariably refer to moral standards *which we hold to be valid*. Our submission to a standard has universal intent.³²

The responsible political actor is similar to the responsible scientist. The scientist must suffer a passionate love of truth and must be firmly committed to the pursuit of that passion. Moreover, the scientist must recognize the truth that he seeks is not merely for

³² "The Message of the Hungarian Revolution," in *Knowing and Being*, 33.

the satiation of subjective prejudices. He

seeks a solution to a problem that is satisfying and compelling both for himself and everybody else. Discovery is an act in which satisfaction, submission and universal legislation are indissolubly combined.³³

Furthermore, Polanyi continues, the claim that the truth of moral standards is binding on all men and women,

(3) entails a distinction between *moral truth* and *moral illusion*. (4) This distinction in turn entails a distinction between two types of motivation. The awareness of moral truth is founded on the recognition of a valid claim, which can be reasonably argued for and supported by evidence; moral illusion is compulsive, like a sensory illusion. (5) Thus, once we admit, as we do when we acknowledge the existence anywhere of valid moral judgements, that true human values exist, and that people can be motivated by their knowledge of them, *we have implicitly denied the claim that all human actions can be explained without any reference to the exercise of moral judgement*.³⁴

When people take political action against a prevailing situation, it need not be assumed that they do so out of personal or subjective interest. If real values exist and await

³³ *Personal Knowledge*, 301. See also, *The Study of Man*, 34-39.

³⁴ "The Message of the Hungarian Revolution," in *Knowing and Being*, 33.

discovery, political action may reflect a resistance to a “real evil.” Thus, Polanyi’s argument concludes: (6) an ability to form value judgements “*proves indispensable*” to the political scientist’s explanation of human behavior.³⁵

Polanyi’s approach to the study of human beings and society requires a concomitant study of the history of human ideas and actions. The political scientist must act as an evaluator of traditions. In *The Study of Man*, Polanyi suggests that the prevailing approaches to the analysis of history fall short of the requirements presented above and thus engender misrepresentations and misunderstandings of past political events. He argues that there are three fallacies connected with the criticism of history prevalent in contemporary analysis. These fallacies are described as follows: (1) “History may be written by applying our [the historian’s] own standards, without allowing for the difference in historical setting.” This problem suggests an unreflective approach to historical analysis. The historian passes judgement on the events and actions of the past without a critical awareness of the limitations of his own time.³⁶ (2) There is the converse problem of historicism, in which historians strive to judge

past actions by the standards of their own time. This method, when taken to its limit, would sanction absolute conformity and render thereby any criticism of the standards of a time meaningless. It fosters an extreme,

³⁵ “The Message of the Hungarian Revolution,” in *Knowing and Being*, 34.

³⁶ *The Study of Man*, 87-88.

altogether fallacious, relativism.³⁷

And finally: (3) The reductionistic quality of the deterministic fallacy supports a materialist conception of history in which all actions appear determined by impulses of power and profit. Interpreted on these lines, all actions are devoid of moral meaning, and man is deprived altogether of responsibility to ideal obligations.³⁸

Polanyi maintains that it is necessary, for a beneficial understanding of history, to attempt to avoid each fallacy. What is required, he argues, is a balanced respect for human beings and the circumstances in which they think and act. By extension, a political scientist, when endeavoring to analyze and judge past political events, must recognize “the biological and cultural rootedness of all free actions” and must acknowledge that human beings each have “some measure of direct access to the standards of truth and rightness and must limit for their sake at some point [their] subjection to given circumstances.” Most importantly, the political scientist must commit himself “to a personal knowledge of the human mind as a seat of responsible choice.”³⁹ The political scientist, in so far as he acts as a political historian, must recognize both his own responsibility to standards of rightness and truth, and attempt

³⁷ *The Study of Man*, 88.

³⁸ *The Study of Man*, 88.

³⁹ *The Study of Man*, 89.

to uncover the quality of responsibility evident in the ideas and actions of the past. Humankind's ability to possess and interpret knowledge, political or otherwise, consists "in an act of understanding and submission."⁴⁰ That submission is an everlasting requirement.

Polanyi's understanding of the requirements of political science provides a crucial template for evaluating interpretations of his political thought, insofar as it establishes the importance, for his political thought, of the fundamental hierarchy between a commitment to the reality of the order of being and the role of traditional authority in the cultivation of knowledge for the purposes of self-improvement.

⁴⁰ *The Study of Man*, 99.

Conclusion

My interpretation of Polanyi's political thought in this thesis developed from an analysis of his philosophical anthropology. In Chapter 1, I presented Polanyi's epistemology and ontology in such a way as to emphasize the fundamental importance of the relationship he sees between the knower and the known, between man and the environment in which he dwells, and between the responsible person and truth. In the second Chapter I examined how these fundamental understandings influence Polanyi's ideas about the important roles of freedom and authority in scientific, intellectual and political communities. In Chapter 3, I further examined the political significance of Polanyi's thought through an analysis of his explicitly political critiques. I found that his political thought is distinctly anti-ideological and concluded, therefore, that when it is understood in its full complexity, it cannot be presented in ideological terms.

At the outset, I stated that a major impetus to the writing of this thesis was the problem I saw with the increasingly orthodox interpretation of Polanyi's 'conservative' political thought. Throughout my exposition and analysis I have shown that while it is correct to notice conservative elements in Polanyi's philosophical understanding, attaching the conservative moniker to his ideas is mis-representative because it neglects the full complexity of his political understanding. In contrast, I developed a

comprehensive account of Polanyi's political thought, highlighting the important relationship between traditional standards and authority, on the one hand, and the responsible commitment to uncovering and upholding the truth and values inherent in the world given to humankind, on the other. Furthermore, I illustrated how the necessary hierarchy between tradition and commitment, emanating from his philosophical anthropology, is in evidence in Polanyi's critique of intellectual and political movements, as well as in his own anti- or non-ideological approaches to the study of politics.

One of the most striking examples of the problems in the increasingly orthodox interpretations of Polanyi's political writings is the attempt to extend his theoretical arguments to the realm of practical politics, thereby suggesting that Polanyi is a publicist for an explicitly conservative ideology. In Chapter 2, I discussed the work of a commentator who maintains that Polanyi's thought necessarily leads to restrictive and even, xenophobic or racist immigration policies. Such ideology is nowhere evident in Polanyi's writings, and, due to his anti-ideological stance, could never accurately be an extension of his thought; it is, however, an extreme example of the general thrust of a commonly accepted interpretive position. The problems associated with this position are, of course, the aforementioned mis-representation of the complexity of Polanyi's political ideas, but equally problematic is the attempt to develop specific policy statements from what is, generally speaking, a theoretical body of work. Nowhere in Polanyi's writings does he state explicitly how he thinks his epistemological and

ontological ideas should be transformed into public policy. To do so on his behalf is to distance oneself from his arguments, and to assume all responsibility for the misrepresentations that may result from such extensions.

When Brownhill and, more importantly, Allen develop such extensions from the partial picture they paint of Polanyi's political thought, they neglect contrary policy projections that may be developed from his work just as readily. If one were to highlight the relationship Polanyi develops between the discovery of new knowledge and intellectual and political reform,¹ one might be encouraged to extend rather radical, typically "left-wing" policy alternatives from that. Consequently, one would be forced to describe Polanyi as a radical, and perhaps even as a revolutionary. Again, this would prove an equally erroneous extension of a partial understanding of Polanyi's political philosophy.

This thesis is presented as an alternative to the developing orthodoxy in the interpretation of Polanyi's political thought. Rather than attempt to position Polanyi in a particular stream of liberalism and present him as a defender of a particular political program, I have sought to understand and illustrate the complexity and depth of his

¹ For example, when Polanyi speaks of the indeterminate implications of discoveries and the important yearning to break out of existing conceptual frameworks experienced by all those who seek to know, he maintains the resulting alterations to these conceptual frameworks must necessarily be accepted if they reflect a more satisfying account of the nature of reality, even when these changes are revolutionary. *Personal Knowledge*, 104, 194-198; *Meaning* 188. See also, Polanyi's treatment of the Copernican revolution in *Personal Knowledge*, 2-5, 145-148.

political understanding through a thorough treatment of his philosophical writings, thereby presenting Polanyi as a keen interpreter of humankind's existence in the modern world.

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