

## A Polanyian Witness in an Age of Betrayal: A Majority World Perspective<sup>1</sup>

*That the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
is a sorry display of  
petty maliciousness,  
no one can deny.  
We live mired in the froth  
of the same sludge,  
All well-handled and worn...*

*It's all the same! Nothing is better!...  
One guy lives a bogus life  
And another robs to feed his ambition,  
It doesn't matter if he's a priest,  
A mattress salesman, King of Clubs,  
A scoundrel or a bum.*

*What a lack of respect,  
What an affront to reason!...*

*Just like in the rude window displays  
Of every pawnshop,  
Life has mixed up itself  
And, wounded by a hanging hook,  
You can see the Bible  
Weep next to a boiler...  
The twentieth century is a... pawnshop*

*If you don't cry, you don't get to suckle,  
And if you don't steal you are a sap.  
Come on, then! Keep it up!  
I'll meet you in that far off fiery furnace.  
Don't think anymore,  
Get out of the way—  
No one care at all  
If you are an honest guy.  
He who slaves away  
Like an ox, night and day  
Might as well be a moocher,  
A murderer, a healer  
Or live outside the law.*

--Enrique Santos Discépolo, *Cambalache*<sup>2</sup>

*Cambalache*, beyond being one of Argentina's most well-known tangos, is part of its cultural liturgy. A few words from any of its lines suffice to recall the whole, and they are often used in reply to the latest tale of political corruption or everyday injustice. The response implies both an acknowledgment of the scandal and a gentle reproof: "What did you expect?" This paper is an invitation to read Michael Polanyi's work from such a social location.

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<sup>1</sup> The majority world perspectives which inform this paper are my own as an Argentine and Emmanuel Katongole's as an Ugandan philosopher and theologian. However, these perspectives operate tacitly throughout.

<sup>2</sup> I have slightly revised Derrick Del Pilar's translation, which can be found in "Poesía de gotán: The Poetry of the Tango," <http://poesiadegotan.com/2011/11/11/cambalache-1935>.

My central argument is that Polanyi's account, while emphasizing the moral dimension of knowing, does not sufficiently engage with the problem of self-interest. He thus invites readings of his work as naively self-defeating and ethically problematic. These readings, while plausible, do not do justice to his account. My hope is that this paper may invite a more robust Polanyian engagement with self-interest, which can "show forth" the power of his account by displaying its "surprising capacity (to the extent that it is true) to bear on" situations with which Polanyi did not engage extensively.<sup>3</sup>

The first and largest section of this paper explores Polanyi's seeming minimization of the problem of self-interest, describing how it may threaten his account. The second part offers my own preliminary contribution towards a Polanyian engagement with the threat of self-interest. I propose the posture of "witness," as developed by Emmanuel Katongole, as a moral/epistemological tool that allows us to remain within an imperfect society, living within it responsibly and without endorsing its "iniquitous ties."<sup>4</sup> The concept of witness offers a strategy of engagement with "the centrifugal forces of self-interest"<sup>5</sup> by drawing on what Polanyi himself does throughout his works. As such, it is not actually an innovation on his account, but the articulation of one of its latent element that may render it more persuasive in an age of betrayal.

## **Part I: The Moral Dimension of Knowing and Self-Interest**

While Polanyi's account of personal knowledge is an epistemological proposal, one of its distinctive features is its emphasis on morality. Esther Meek says that Polanyi points to the "moral foundation of all knowing," showing that, because knowing is "fundamentally a responsible human act of commitment," it is radically shaped by "our responsibility or irresponsibility, our wisdom and foolishness, our expertise and our ignorance."<sup>6</sup> That is, he describes the "normative dimension of knowing which renders human knowing so vulnerable to human rebellion."<sup>7</sup>

Yet, while Polanyi makes clear that knowing demands moral responsibility (in the form of selfless devotion towards reality, trust/sincerity among peers, and submission/stewardship between students and masters), he dwells very little on how to engage with the self-interest that could undermine

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<sup>3</sup> Yeager, "Confronting the Minotaur: Moral Inversion and Polanyi's Moral Philosophy," 44. I thank David Rutledge for referring me to her work.

<sup>4</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 245.

<sup>5</sup> I owe the term to D.M. Yeager's discussion of Charles Taylor in "Taylor and Polanyi on Moral Sources and Social Systems."

<sup>6</sup> Meek, "Longing to Know and the Complexities of Knowing God," 39.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

each of these postures. In the following section, I will show this gap in Polanyi's account at the level of the individual knower/scientist,<sup>8</sup> communities of trust,<sup>9</sup> and civic society.

### *The Knower and Devotion to Truth*

For Polanyi, the individual knower is the one who, through responsible personal acts of appraisal, can "bridge the disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity...by striving passionately to fulfill his personal obligation to universal standards."<sup>10</sup> The knower's commitment to these universal standards, which he must acknowledge and fulfill under the guidance of his own conscience, is what saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective.<sup>11</sup> That is, the knower's universal intent means that he "does not do as he pleases, but compels himself forcibly to act as he believes he must"<sup>12</sup> in order to gain "a firmer foothold in reality."<sup>13</sup> The opposite of responsible decision, for Polanyi, is "egocentric arbitrariness."<sup>14</sup>

Fulfilling these universal obligations is costly to the knower. For Polanyi, discovery is no detached, safe examination. Rather, it involves a "pouring out" of ourselves to gain a new vision of reality.<sup>15</sup> The knower cannot evaluate a new framework from without, but must risk her own stable frameworks in a "strenuous growing towards an unknown achievement,"<sup>16</sup> potentially enduring an "irreversible self-conversion."<sup>17</sup> She, further, has no certainty that she will succeed in gaining that "firmer foothold on reality."<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, "the normal outcome of [the] daring commitment" required for every great discovery "is failure."<sup>19</sup> On the other, while she may succeed in converting herself to a new and more satisfying framework, she risks the rejection of her community: the "self-modifying" act of discovery may leave her across a logical

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<sup>8</sup> I agree with David Rutledge that, in its general outline, Polanyi's articulation of personal knowledge accounts for the dynamics that govern "other great systems of utterances" (PK 133). Rutledge's observation is found in "'Conquer or Die?': Intellectual Controversy and Personal Knowledge," 14, 24.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term "communities of trust" rather than "society of explorers" in order to refer to communities in other traditions. I include Polanyi's "society of explorers" in the reference.

<sup>10</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66, 195, 318.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 64, 172, etc.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 309–310.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

gap that her peers refuse to cross.<sup>20</sup> However, not even persuasive success can provide her with certainty: her discovery may be true, and therefore imply unforeseen consequences, or it may be false, and its acceptance constitute the “success of a vast error.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the scientist is continually, arduously striving for a reality which offers her little in terms of security. Her commitment to reality “is,” says Polanyi, “like love:” “a ‘shirt of flame,’ blazing with passion...consumed by devotion to a universal demand.”<sup>22</sup>

In a passage from *Science, Faith, and Society* that deserves to be quoted at length, Polanyi considers what would occur if the scientist were to be driven by self-interest, instead:

The scientist...must not be tempted to canvass primarily his fellow scientists’ approval. Though his income, his independence, his influence, in fact his whole standing in the world will depend throughout his career on the amount of credit he can gain in the eyes of scientific opinion, he must not aim primarily at this credit, but only at satisfying the standards of science. For the shorter way of gaining credit with scientific opinion may lead far astray from good science. The quickest impression on the scientific world may be made not by publishing the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but rather by serving up an interesting and plausible story composed of parts of the truth with a little straight invention admixed in it. Such a composition, if judiciously guarded by interspersed ambiguities, will be extremely difficult to controvert, and in a field in which experiments are laborious or intrinsically difficult to reproduce may stand for years unchallenged. A considerable reputation can be built up and a very comfortable university post be gained before this kind of swindle transpires—if it ever does....<sup>23</sup>

This description is part of Polanyi’s argument against attempting to centrally control science. His point is that standards of science cannot be ensured by “mere conformity to the actual demands of scientific opinion,” but require “the support of moral conviction, stemming from devotion to science and prepared to operate independently of existing scientific opinion.”<sup>24</sup> Yet the vision of the self-seeking scientist that he conjures up is disturbing, and Polanyi does not address it. He

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2310–311.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>23</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 53–54.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

seems to imply that the process of becoming a scientist must produce the necessary “emotional and moral surrender to science:” because scientists ought to be devoted to science, they are, in fact, devoted to science.<sup>25</sup> This assumption also seems on display in Polanyi’s statement (quoted above) that the scientist’s commitment to reality “is” (not “ought to be”) like love.<sup>26</sup> Time and again in *Science, Faith, and Society* Polanyi suggests that, if scientists were not devoted to the standards of science, “science would cease to exist.” Yet I do not think that this statement properly reckons with, in Polanyi’s words, “how weak we all are at times in resisting temptation to untruthfulness and how imperfect our love of truth is at best.”<sup>27</sup>

Polanyi is mostly silent, then, in addressing the problem of self-interest. However, in *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi suggests that a man may be a “genius, yet be also sycophantic, vain, envious, and spiteful;” he would then be “a prince of letters,” but “a despicable person.”<sup>28</sup> This assertion seems to contradict his account: It is doubtful that such individuals, in their devotion to themselves, would reliably expend the great personal cost that Polanyi has shown is necessary for achieving contact with reality. Considering the great effort that Polanyi expends to describe the moral foundation of knowing, I doubt that this quotation faithfully represents the Polanyian position. However, it seems that Edward Pols does: he asserts that Polanyi departs from Plato in that, while he “recognizes passionate commitment as the most important personal element in the ‘plunging’ component of tacit knowledge, he does not maintain that knowledge is possible only to the virtuous.”<sup>29</sup>

How are we to understand Polanyi’s posture towards self-interest, then? It appears to me that the selfless compulsion to follow universal standards in order to see reality does require virtue. Without it, per Polanyi’s account, a self-protective knower may be kept from taking the proper risks that discovery entails. She might also betray her conscience in order to further her own constructs. This would not only keep the knower from reality, but also potentially threaten the community of trust which sustains the pursuit of science and other “articulate areas of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>26</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 215.

<sup>29</sup> Pols, “Polanyi and the Problem of Metaphysical Knowledge,” 58, 66.

culture.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Trust in the Community and Devotion to Truth*

Polanyi posits that articulate systems require communities of trust in order to preserve their fund of knowledge and continue the “historically extended, socially embodied argument” of the system’s tradition.<sup>31</sup> Trust is required for the community’s preservation because the tacit components of its art cannot be fully formalized, and thus the transmission of knowledge relies on persons transferring skills to other persons in processes that resemble *mimesis*<sup>32</sup> and which presume trust.<sup>33</sup> For Polanyi “these hidden rules can be assimilated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another.”<sup>34</sup> The student must be able to submit to the master, then, because he trusts the master’s skill and “sincere attachment” to the tradition.<sup>35</sup>

Trust is also required in the desire and competence of the community’s authorities to preserve the tradition through their administration of its institutions.<sup>36</sup> In the case of science, these authorities make personal appraisals regarding the validity and value of various proposals put forward for dissemination,<sup>37</sup> accredit other scientists,<sup>38</sup> and grant positions and funding.<sup>39</sup> These institutions and authorities, by upholding the standards of science, enable in turn mutual reliance among peers.<sup>40</sup> The decisions of a community’s authorities are not accepted primarily (if at all) on the basis of any coercive power, but because they are trusted to be skillful performers of the tradition who are seeking to uphold it.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> I owe the term to David Rutledge in “‘Conquer or Die’?: Intellectual Controversy and Personal Knowledge,” 19.

<sup>31</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, cited in Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason*, 149.

<sup>32</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 119, for example; Pols, “Polanyi and the Problem of Metaphysical Knowledge,” 69.

<sup>34</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 46 This is the sort of argument in various parts of the book, including the section on the threat of conflict between masters and pupils, of improperly-functioning scientific opinion, and of mistrust between scientists. Ibid., 46, 50, 52, respectively.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 47ff.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 48–49.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 52; Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 163–64.

<sup>41</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 52–53.

Trust within these communities is grounded in each member's devotion to the tradition.<sup>42</sup> Members must be able to trust one another not to be “cranks or charlatans” when judged by the standards of the community. Members must also be able to trust authorities to exercise their authority humbly, understanding the orthodoxy which they protect to be “only a temporary and imperfect embodiment of the traditional standards of science” and, thus, being willing to be corrected.<sup>43</sup> They must also be trusted to exercise authority sacrificially, training students to “share the ground on which their teachers stand and to take their stand for their own independence,”<sup>44</sup> even if this might diminish the masters' power. If, instead, the administration of the institutions is done on a basis other than the desire to uphold its standards, “however rich the fund of local genius may be, such an environment will fail to bring it to fruition.”<sup>45</sup> In short, knowers' consciences are not only important for epistemic achievement, they also sustain the unity and survival of the community: “scientists must feel under obligation to uphold the ideals of science and be guided by this obligation, both in exercising authority and in submitting to that of their fellows, otherwise science must die.”<sup>46</sup>

However, having stressed again the significance of mutual trust and selfless devotion to the standards of science, Polanyi does not seem to reckon seriously with the possibility that self-interest could threaten this devotion. Conceding, for example, that rival scientists may seek to “bring an opponent into intellectual contempt or to silence him in order to gain attention to himself” and admitting that this may be “tragically inevitable behavior,” he does not discuss the impact that such actions may have on a fiduciary community.<sup>47</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that such a hostile environment may prompt the scientist to consider self-interest (in either self-promotion or defense) above the demands of science. Yet Polanyi does not contemplate the “centrifugal force” of betrayal between peers.

In another case, Polanyi describes the threat of “masters who try to impose their personal

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<sup>42</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 207–209; as it regards science, for example, Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 46, 52.

<sup>43</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 53.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>45</sup> As Polanyi says it is done in countries where science is not respected for its own sake in Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 182; see also Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 49–50.

<sup>46</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 54.

<sup>47</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 160.

fads on their research students” and notes that they must be “firmly opposed.”<sup>48</sup> But he then states that “these failings are so infrequent that the resulting occasional breaches can be settled without difficulty by appeal to general scientific opinion.”<sup>49</sup> The result is that the “scandal is eliminated by conciliation or disciplinary measures, or it is at least isolated and allowed to burn out without much harm done.”<sup>50</sup> That such cases would be brought to the attention of the scientific community and “settled without difficulty” seems an overly optimistic assessment.

Polanyi assumes that the preservation of a community relies on “the coherence of all men’s consciences in the grounds of the same general tradition.”<sup>51</sup> However, even if all agree on what *ought* to be done, it does not follow that all will actually follow their conscience. D.M Yeager notes that Polanyi “seems to take for granted that our life in common is simply not about (and is unmarred by) the appetites, the self, self-indulgence, self gratification.”<sup>52</sup> She adds that “to thus set the egoistic, self-gratifying side of our lives outside the arena of social theory is, when one thinks about it, a remarkable move to make.”<sup>53</sup>

### *Civic Society’s Iniquity and Conscience*

To be exhaustive, it is important to examine Polanyi’s discussion of the preservation and flourishing of a free society. Since this topic is too vast and complex to cover fully, I will restrict myself to a few observations which point to some areas for further development of a Polanyian engagement with self-interest.

In contrast to the highly moral descriptions of knowers and communities of trust, Polanyi admits that a free society’s ties are “iniquitous.”<sup>54</sup> Civic society intertwines the “high ideals of morality” with the “civic exigencies” of “parochial” loyalty, “appetitive” property, and “violent” public authority.<sup>55</sup> This intertwining creates a precarious situation. The members of the free society require these civic ties for their flourishing, but they rightly chafe against them because

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>49</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 46–47.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 82 In this quotation, Polanyi is referring to the free society. However, I believe that the comment can also apply to a community of trust. .

<sup>52</sup> Yeager, “Taylor and Polanyi on Moral Sources and Social Systems,” 19.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 245.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 215–216.

they are “essentially at variance with the universal intent of intellectual or moral standards.”<sup>56</sup> The problem that arises is that, when the citizenry sees that moral standards are significantly shaped by power, property, and local loyalty, they may question whether moral thought has any autonomy at all. If this questioning leads to a denial of the autonomy (and, therefore, genuineness) of moral thought, it may lead eventually to a rejection of morality as a sham and, thus, “to the subjection of all thought to local patriotism, economic interest and the power of the state.”<sup>57</sup> The citizens’ questioning, which began out of concern for morality, can lead to the denial of morals. This dynamic lies behind the complex phenomenon which Polanyi calls “moral inversion.”<sup>58</sup>

I cannot do justice to his account in this paper. However, I will note that Polanyi does not address self-interest as *itself* a threat. It is moral perfectionism which is ultimately responsible for the problem.<sup>59</sup> Thus, in a memorable passage, his recommendation to those of us who are concerned with the problem of self-interest in society is that we must pledge “allegiance to a manifestly imperfect society” because “an absolute renewal of society can be attempted only by an absolute power which must inevitably destroy the moral life of man.”<sup>60</sup>

I agree with Polanyi’s warning against moral perfectionism. I believe, however, that he ought also to address the problem of self-interest itself which, by his own account, could undermine a free society. In a free society, Polanyi says, the government “bows in advance to the moral consensus freely arrived at by its citizens, not because they so decide, but because they are deemed competent to decide *rightly*, as the authentic spokesman of the social conscience.”<sup>61</sup> That is, the government bows to the consensus of its citizens like the scientists bows to her conscience. The citizens’ consensus functions as a moral conscience. Here again, however, Polanyi seems to skip over the distinction between what “ought” to be and what “is.” The iniquity that Polanyi

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<sup>56</sup> Pols, “Polanyi and the Problem of Metaphysical Knowledge,” 215.

<sup>57</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 216.

<sup>58</sup> For a thorough and nuanced review of this phenomenon, see Yeager, “Confronting the Minotaur: Moral Inversion and Polanyi’s Moral Philosophy.”

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*. As I will discuss later, it is this fear of moral perfectionism which may provide a reason for Polanyi’s minimization of the problem of self-interest.

<sup>60</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 245.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

attributes to public authority is that it is violent,<sup>62</sup> not that it may seek to evade the citizen's consensus. Likewise, although Polanyi would grant that citizens' consensus may be wrong, he does not seem to reckon with the possibility that they may be committed to self-interest rather than "moral and intellectual standards."<sup>63</sup> Although I would strongly agree with Polanyi that we ought not to reduce all moral debates to the element of self-interest, I do believe Yeager's phrase applies here again: "to thus set the egoistic, self-gratifying side of our lives outside the arena of social theory is, when one thinks about it, a remarkable move to make."<sup>64</sup>

Once more, my aim is not to undermine Polanyi's account. Rather, because I believe that it is of immense significance, I am concerned that his minimization or sidestepping of the problem of self-interest could unjustly undermine his work. If, for example, I were to interpret Polanyi's encouragement to pledge my allegiance "to a manifestly imperfect society" as my need to accept self-interested betrayal to the standards of a free society, I would be betraying Polanyi's own case. I do not believe that is a correct interpretation of his work. He himself argues that the civic life of a free society is "continuously improved solely by the cultivation of moral principles."<sup>65</sup> However, by largely ignoring the threat of self-interest, he makes such readings plausible.

These readings would be especially problematic to those who have been on the "wrong side" of society's iniquitous ties. Although I would not expect Polanyi to argue with the skeptic who has embraced systematic doubt,<sup>66</sup> I do believe it is appropriate to offer at least Polanyian "strategies of survival" for those who have experienced betrayal at the hands of colleagues and authorities and who, thus, might be tempted to agree with "Cambalache:"

Don't think anymore,  
Get out of the way—  
No one cares at all,  
If you are an honest guy.  
He who slaves away,  
Like an ox, night and day,

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<sup>62</sup> Polanyi says that civic culture can flourish only "thanks to physical coercion" and thus it is "sown in corruption;" Polanyi says that coercion is the realm of public authority. *Ibid.*, 212–213, 224.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>64</sup> Yeager, "Taylor and Polanyi on Moral Sources and Social Systems," 19.

<sup>65</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 224.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

Might as well be a moocher,  
A murderer, a healer,  
Or live outside the law.

### *Polanyi's Reasons*

Given the brilliance and complexity of Polanyi's proposal, it is important to offer some plausible account for his minimization of self-interest. Mary Jo Nye argues that Polanyi's experience at the relatively independent, resource-rich Fritz Haber Institute for Physical Chemistry "sheltered [him] to a large extent from the pressures to make his own research conform either to pedagogical imperatives of the university or to demands from the state or from industrial employers for immediately useful results."<sup>67</sup> Without significant scarcity and external pressures, it is possible that self-interested betrayal was not something that Polanyi experienced regularly. If his experiences account for Polanyi's optimism, then articulating his account for a society threatened by self-interest would require the development of his proposal to understand how it bears in a new situation.

Another reason behind Polanyi's minimization of self-interest might involve his belief that order in society emerges spontaneously. He thus simply focused on advising scientists and citizens to, one might say, "stay in the system" until it adjusts itself. If so, it would be important to consider how individuals can obey their conscience while remaining in a society of betrayal.

Most likely, however, Polanyi minimized the problem of self-interest out of concern with moral perfectionism. According to Prosch, Polanyi was fighting the "twin devils of the ideal of knowledge as detached objectivity and the ideal of action as moral perfectionism,"<sup>68</sup> which Polanyi saw behind modern totalitarianism. While the former required that Polanyi articulate the personal (and moral) dimension of knowing, the latter required that he temper moral expectations which threaten both individual and intellectual freedom for the sake of a total moral renewal.

However, engaging those prone to moral fanaticism ought not to be done on intellectual grounds alone.<sup>69</sup> While Polanyi attributes the rise of objectivism,<sup>70</sup> moral perfectionism,<sup>71</sup> and

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<sup>67</sup> Nye, "Michael Polanyi and the Social Construction of Science," 9.

<sup>68</sup> Prosch, *Michael Polanyi*, 272.

<sup>69</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 151.

totalitarianism<sup>72</sup> to erroneous intellectual ideas, I believe that the historical starting points that Polanyi himself identifies might invite a reading of these phenomena as responses to the widespread moral bankruptcy of self-seeking traditional authorities. Polanyi, thus, needs to show that his account can also offer strategies to respond to such situations.

For example, Polanyi sees “moral perfectionism” as arising during the period of Gregorian Reforms in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>73</sup> However, these reforms likely came about because of “popular revolts against the clergy’s”<sup>74</sup> widespread corruption, and not strictly as the fruit of an erroneous intellectual/religious development. Or, Polanyi says that objectivism has been on the rise since intellectual leaders sought to diminish the “excessive authority” over scholars exercised by the Christian Church in the Middle Ages.<sup>75</sup> It could be said, also, that objectivism has been on the rise since the moral condition of the Church led, first, to bitter fractures and, then, to the Wars of Religion, creating widespread suspicion of the viability of a society under traditional authorities. Finally, Polanyi acknowledges that Marxism could be seen as both the child of objectivism, as well as the fruit of the vast inequalities and misery brought about by the industrial revolution.<sup>76</sup> That is, each of these movements is not only an idea that must be countered intellectually, but also an ethical response to self-interest which must be countered by a superior ethical proposal. This proposal must account for the presence and danger of self-interest, and offer appropriate responses.

In other words, those who have turned to objectivism out of a concern with self-interest may need to be shown the power of a Polanyian proposal to engage morally with it. Otherwise, Polanyi’s emphasis on tradition and trust appears naïve and oppressive. I believe that Polanyi himself would endorse such a project, as he proposes that a valid criteria for choosing between

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 6–17, for example.

<sup>71</sup> This is the other problem that Polanyi discerns behind the rise of the totalitarian state; see Prosch, *Michael Polanyi*, 32–33.

<sup>72</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 227–239.

<sup>73</sup> Prosch, *Michael Polanyi*, 26–27.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 76.

<sup>76</sup> Hence his fear of moral perfectionism in, for example, Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 245.

accounts is to weigh which one establishes a “much more decent and responsible relationships between human beings.”<sup>77</sup>

This paper, then, is an invitation to mine Polanyi’s work to reckon more fully with self-interest “from within” the Polanyian tradition. Although that project is beyond the scope of this paper, in the next section I offer a preliminary proposal towards it through a summary of Emmanuel Katongole’s concept of “witness” as an epistemological tool which can counter the centrifugal force of self-interest within a tradition.

## **Part II: “Witness” and the Tradition**

A significant criticism of tradition-dependent accounts of knowledge like Polanyi’s is that they naively rely on trust in others and, especially, on morally fallible authority. A second critique of such accounts (which has also been leveled at Polanyi) is that they must encourage either relativism or ethnocentrism.<sup>78</sup> Katongole introduces the concept of “witness” to address the second critique, but I believe that it can also address the former. In this section, I will first describe Katongole’s project and development of the concept of “witness” and, then, I will show how it can provide strategies to engage morally with self-interest. I hope to show that these strategies are not only a faithful extension of Polanyi’s work, but already implied in it.

### *Katongole’s Project and the Concept of Witness*

In one section of *Beyond Universal Reason*, Emmanuel Katongole provides a defense of the work of Stanley Hauerwas by, in part, arguing for a tradition-dependent account of truth and objectivity. First, Katongole takes up the epistemological critiques of subjectivism and relativism that have been leveled against Hauerwas’ work and shows that they arise only from a foundationalist epistemology. Then, Katongole offers a constructive proposal on how traditions can interact fruitfully through the concept of “witness.”

Katongole’s account of truth and objectivity is largely Aristotelian. Rejecting foundationalism, he argues that objectivity is primarily a moral, rather than methodological, concept.<sup>79</sup> It is, further, a

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<sup>77</sup> Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 26.

<sup>78</sup> Two notable examples of each of these critiques are William Earle’s assessment of Polanyi’s proposal as radically subjectivist, cited in Nye, *Michael Polanyi and His Generation*, and Najder’s accusation of ethnocentrism in “‘Moral Inversion’ or Moral Revaluation?”

<sup>79</sup> Citing Alasdair MacIntyre in Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason*, 141.

tradition-dependent concept.<sup>80</sup> Thus, becoming objective implies becoming a skilled practitioner of the tradition.<sup>81</sup> However, while objectivity is tradition-dependent and pursued from within a given situation, it emerges from a “pressure toward universalization.” For Katongole, the result is that traditions do not *necessarily* settle into parochialism. They may do so but, given the “pressure toward universalization” within them, that would constitute a failure.

Katongole argues that before such a danger, the “stranger” (perhaps in the form of a rival tradition) can be beneficial.<sup>82</sup> A peaceful encounter with the stranger can “jolt a tradition into critical self-examination,” leading it to a deeper understanding of its riches or provoking an epistemological crisis which shows its limits.<sup>83</sup> It also “may offer imaginative possibilities to get a tradition out of an epistemological crisis.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, although the presence of the stranger can (and often is) perceived as a threat, a tradition-dependent account of objectivity actually enjoins contact with the stranger.<sup>85</sup> In the absence of the certainty that a tradition has the whole truth, and without a “story of stories” or foundation which may arbitrate between rival traditions, it is necessary to witness (and be witnessed by) the stranger in order to avoid ideological self-deception.<sup>86</sup>

Witness is, then, the form of rational contact between traditions. It is so both in the sense of “witness” as observing the other and of being observed by the other. Witness allows for a tradition’s claims to be tested, not against an absolute view of reality (as in foundationalism), but “by the way these claims are embodied within the concrete practices, institutions, and characters they generate, and how they fare in confrontation (witness) with other contrary claims.”<sup>87</sup> Traditions compete based on their narrative superiority: their coherence, as well as their ability to “accommodate some (e.g., tragedy) aspect of existence.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, the health of a community depends on its members’ ability to practice their own tradition’s claims and interpret rival claims towards fruitfully extending their own tradition. Among other similarities, I find an important affirmation of the congruence between Katongole and Polanyi in the extent to which Polanyi puts forward “the concrete practices, institutions, and characters” of science as an argument for its power and independence.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 148, quoting Joseph Dunne’s *Back to the Rough Ground*.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 173–174.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 174.

### *The Concept of Witness and Intellectual Disagreement*

Within Polanyi's account, Katongole's conception of witness may provide an alternative to the violent form that intellectual disagreement seems to take in Polanyi's work, minimizing the "centrifugal force" that such disagreements can have on a community of trust. Along with David Rutledge, I do not believe that Polanyi intends to affirm either conflict or its resolution as the "center" of science; rather, because "reality continually unfolds new vistas before us, science will never reach a point at which there are no conflict to resolve."<sup>89</sup> However, I believe (also in agreement with David Rutledge) that it is possible for conflict to take place in a less virulent manner than Polanyi seems to imply. Witness, as a strategy within tradition-dependent account of knowledge, provides an alternative practice which is more coherent with Polanyi's work. Polanyi notes that conflict between rival views tends to involve the refusal of the opponents to accept the other's "way of arguing" and that such refusal needs to be justified by making them "appear altogether unreasonable."<sup>90</sup> The result is that each side will try to wholly discredit the opponent, even attacking their own person.<sup>91</sup>

However, as Polanyi's own work shows, a tradition-dependent approach to knowledge grants sufficient warrant for opponents to refuse to enter into each other's way of arguing. In such a situation, although they may compete to show the greater validity or comprehensiveness of their theory, there is no need to make the other appear wholly deluded. They would have a theoretical case for allowing the presence of the other as a recognition of their own limited grasp of reality, and to engage insofar as it aids toward a more faithful articulation of their own theories (exposing questions that need to be answered, and inviting a reaffirmation of that which they have achieved).

It should be clear, then, that witnessing is not a relativistic "letting be" that avoids conflict so that we can isolate ourselves in our own frameworks. It is, rather, an intentional act that flows from the recognition that, in a vast world where we are located here and not there, the other is essential to our striving for reality. It appears to me that the majority of the cases of intellectual disagreement which Polanyi mentions are, in fact, carried out under such peaceful conditions. The concept of witness, then, provides an account of that phenomenon.

### *The Concept of Witness and the Betrayal of the Authorities*

Finally, I believe that the epistemological concept of witness provides an "imaginative possibility" for those who find themselves under traditional authorities who may be (knowingly or inadvertently)

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<sup>89</sup> Rutledge, "'Conquer or Die?': Intellectual Controversy and Personal Knowledge," 17.

<sup>90</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 151.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

undermining the tradition. In such contexts, witnessing does not take the form of observation or welcome of the other. Rather, it consists in *being* a witness, allowing oneself to appear “other” and to remain other for the sake of the tradition. The witness, thus, provides an embodied alternative to the consensus. Refusing to be assimilated into the current orthodoxy while claiming allegiance to the tradition, she leaves open the possibility for renewal. She does so by inviting an “interpretative dialogue which is capable of generating critical attentiveness” (which the authorities might accept, refuse, or seek to suppress).<sup>92</sup>

Polanyi himself, in his works, is a prime example of a witness. He presents himself as other peacefully and, by pointing to the riches of science and spelling out the commitments which have made these possible, invites a reconsideration of the regnant objectivist orthodoxy, its concepts, and its practices. As a witness, he often resists making himself understood, being unwilling to use the language of the academy when it would endanger his therapeutic intent.<sup>93</sup> Through an intentional “inarticulacy,” he rejects the distortions of the critical tradition, and invites the reader’s transformation.

Can the concept of witness cohere with Polanyi’s statements that we must, for the sake of freedom, be willing to pledge “allegiance to a manifestly imperfect society”?<sup>94</sup> I believe so. “Witness” is the form that a morally responsible allegiance to such a society must take. The witness does not violently attack in a quixotic attempt to overthrow the foundations; she does not demand “an absolute renewal of society.” Her peaceful presence is the threat to any dead or totalitarian orthodoxy that would seek to suppress her. She is a reminder that there is an alternative. This sense of “witness,” I believe, sheds light on the way that Polanyi uses science as an alternative social arrangement. He, in fact, uses the very term “witness” in a section of *the Logic of Liberty* which I will quote at length:

How sharply the spirit of pure scholarship is opposed to the claims of totalitarianism has been sufficiently proven on many cruel occasions. Universities which upheld the purity of their standards under totalitarianism invariably had to stand up to harsh pressure and often suffered heavy penalties. The whole world recognizes to-day its debt to universities in Poland and Norway, in Holland, Belgium, and France, where such pressure was withstood and such penalties endured. These places are witnesses today to the convictions underlying our European civilization and hold out the hope of a genuine European recovery. And where, on the contrary, universities have allowed themselves to be cajoled or terrorized into compromising their standards, we feel that the

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<sup>92</sup> Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason*, 172.

<sup>93</sup> I am alluding here to William Poteat’s observations in “Sitting Down to Read Personal Knowledge”. I thank David Rutledge for the reference.

<sup>94</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 245.

very roots of our civilization have been marred. In such places our hopes for the future burn low.

The world needs science today above all as an example of the good life. Spread out over the planet scientists form even to-day, though submerged by disaster, the body of a great and good society. Even at present scientists of Moscow and Cambridge, Bangalore and San Francisco respect the same standards in science; and in the depths of shattered Germany and Japan a scientist is still one of ourselves, upholding the same code of scientific work. Isolated though we are today from each other, we still bear the mark of a common intellectual heritage and claim succession to the same great forerunners.

Such is my conception of the relation of science to the community in our days. In the great struggle for our civilization science occupies a section in the front line...Whatever scorn be poured upon us by those who find our faith in pure science old-fashioned, and whatever condemnation by others who think us selfish, we must persist in vindicating the ideals of science.<sup>95</sup>

The concept of “witness” is not, then, an innovation on Polanyi’s work. Rather, it articulates an epistemological and moral strategy which is already present in it, and which can be deployed towards engaging morally with the “centrifugal forces of self-interest.” It also preserves both Polanyi’s articulation of the moral foundations of all knowing, as well as his commitment to tradition. It is clear that “witness” does not address the problem of self-interest comprehensively. However, I believe that it points to the possibility of engaging with it from within a Polanyian account.

## Conclusion

The first part of this paper argued that Polanyi does not sufficiently address the threat that self-interest poses to personal knowledge. This gap, insofar as it invites readings of Polanyi as naïve or oppressive, generates the need for a more robust, Polanyian engagement with self-interest. The second part sought to show that such a project need not entail a denial of key tenets of Polanyi’s proposal. Rather, it may require offering knowers Polanyian resources to live according to their conscience from within communities of betrayal—that is, to be a Polanyian witness in the age of *Cambalache*.

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<sup>95</sup> Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, 6–7.

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