

**A Response to Jon Fennell’s “Michael Polanyi and the Theologico-Political Problem”
by Dale Cannon**

Jon’s essay is principally concerned with two successive ideas of Jewish political philosopher Leo Strauss about the relationship between reason and revelation, which Strauss calls “the theologico-political problem.” He begins, however, by noting and explaining Polanyi’s conception of the relationship between *scientific and historical criticism* on the one hand and *Christian revelation* on the other articulated in *Personal Knowledge*, which is the closest Polanyi comes to directly addressing the relation of reason and revelation and is quite different from Strauss’s ideas. Polanyi appears to have taken over the conception he presents from Paul Tillich, construing reason and revelation *as being “so different in kind that they logically cannot conflict.”* Jon employs this conception (along with Polanyi’s more general understanding of epistemology) to illuminate Strauss’ changing ideas on the subject—from one of irreconcilable conflict to one of conciliating tension. Ultimately, Jon endorses the second of Strauss’s two understandings of reason and revelation where they are conceived as competing authorities, yes, but *standing alongside each other in a fruitful, complementary tension.* This later view of reason and revelation Jon argues to be an understanding that is compatible with and substantially implied by Polanyi’s fully developed epistemology, much more so than the Tillichian notion explicitly cited. At the end of his paper Jon returns to a consideration of the Tillichian conception and concludes it to be “an unnecessary and ultimately pernicious” conception, occasioned by the powerful opposition to religion of modernist scientism, that is best rejected and left behind.

There are a lot of issues worth raised by Jon’s paper that are worth exploring. I will address only a couple of them.

Through the course of his career, Strauss, according to Jon, developed two quite different conceptions of the theologico-political problem: a modern critical conception and a pre-modern traditional conception, which Strauss later came to embrace through a reconsideration of Socrates and the pre-modern Western philosophical tradition, once he realized the inadequacy of the modern critical conception due to its being prejudicially based in radical methodological doubt. (Note here that Strauss makes a philosophical move akin to Polanyi's move from a Critical philosophical orientation to a Post-Critical orientation. I think that there may be more to this apparent kinship between Polanyi and Strauss than Jon realized in writing this paper.)

Now the theologico-political problem is not just a problem of reason *vis-à-vis* religion's claim to an ultimate revealed authority that must be obeyed. For Strauss it is no less a problem *vis-à-vis* political authority when the latter appeals to a ground of ultimate, unquestionable allegiance which would take priority over a philosopher's reasoned reflection. This is why Strauss calls it the theologico-*political* problem—a problem, take note, for philosophers, for philosophy as a way of life. The problem is a problem for philosophers confronting the claims of religion and/or the claims of the state where those claims presume precedence and priority over the conclusions of whatever the philosopher determines to be the conclusions of reason. (For Strauss, the philosopher seeks “to live seriously in accordance with the principle that no authority is binding unless one sees its rationality and hence its legitimacy for oneself.”)

As I read it, Strauss's problem is not a problem for philosophy conceived as an academic discipline among disciplines (though it could be if, say, religious or political concerns dictated some administrative policy within the academy in a manner not open to question), nor is it a problem for philosophy conceived broadly as a mode of reasoned reflection and inquiry into the presuppositions of any human endeavor. (I admit that my distinctions here among three different

senses of “philosophy” are somewhat sharper than those Jon makes in his paper.) Philosophy for Polanyi and practiced by Polanyi would be the latter of these two, I believe, and not philosophy as a way of life for an individual person which Strauss chooses to emphasize. I don’t think philosophy as a way of life for an individual person ever happened to be a concern for Polanyi. In consequence I suspect that Strauss’s theologico-philosophical problem (at least as conceived by Strauss) was never a vital problem for Polanyi.

Except perhaps in one respect, a respect not taken up by Jon in his paper. In Polanyi’s public defense of freedom for pure scientific research [but also for freedom of thought generally] over against political-social planning of scientific research for social utilitarian ends, Polanyi did in fact engage in defending the conscience of rational scientific inquiry into truth and knowledge for its own sake (that is, defending the scientist and the scientific community obeying their intellectual/rational conscience, where it came into conflict with the state). In this respect, Polanyi’s argument here was not against the claims of the alleged truths of revealed religion (though it might have been so in another age), but against the claims of a secularized political-social order on behalf of social progress (itself a secularized god?). It seems to me to be well worth inquiring whether Jon’s reflections on the different answers to the theologico-political problem would illuminate this other conflict (i.e., whether they would illumine Polanyi’s vigorous advocacy of Freedom of Thought).

Now the first of Strauss’s two conceptions of the relationship between reason and revelation is a product of the Enlightenment critique of religions claiming to be based on revelation, specifically that of Baruch Spinoza. For Spinoza, reason on the one hand and revelation on the other are conceived as opposing irreconcilable authorities, each calling into

question the other's foundational trust. Upon closer examination, Strauss, according to Jon's account, came to realize that neither disproves the other, but each proceeds from a basis of faith, from something unproven, from "an unevident assumption"—in consequence, leaving their "cognitive status" equivalent. But this realization for a modern critical philosopher purporting to operate only on the basis of evident and necessary knowledge (accepting nothing that is not clearly and distinctly known), is scandalous. The modern critical ideal of Reason thus conceived destroys itself.

Strauss, in response, turns to a deep and systematic re-examination of medieval and ancient philosophy and specifically pre-modern understandings of rationality in hope of finding something more satisfactory. This turn and reexamination leads Strauss eventually to find an alternative precedent in Socrates (after turning to his own "second method" [his "second sailing," on some translations] recounted in Plato's *Phaedo*) whose starting point is not universal doubt but a life of wonder, a life of unceasingly dialectical questioning of common (contradictory) opinions about the nature of things. This, for Strauss, lies at the heart of pre-modern, classical rationality, not universal doubt and a quest for certainty, and affords a kind of common meeting ground of uncertain faith between the philosopher and the believer both in quest of the truth, in quest of "something splendid to be discovered."

Jon then asks where then are we to situate a Polanyian understanding of the relation of reason and revelation among three alternatives: (1) Strauss's modern critical conception which pits reason and revelation against each other in irreconcilable opposition; (2) Strauss's pre-modern conception which situates reason and revelation in an unending but fruitful dialectic; and (3) Polanyi's Tillichian conception of reason and revelation as radically distinct and independent roads to separate truths. Jon concludes that the second of these three seems the most fitting to

Polanyi's full philosophical understanding, rendering the Tillichian conception a tangential, unnecessary, and ultimately pernicious distraction to which Polanyi was temporarily drawn but should never have entertained. So, Jon concludes that Polanyi and Strauss come down to holding (or at least implying) pretty much the same answer to the theologico-political problem.

I have a few further questions:

- Despite the similarity according to Jon of their answers to the t-p problem, are Strauss and Polanyi really in fundamental agreement across the board? Are there points of significant disagreement? What about Polanyi's theory of the tacit dimension to all knowledge? Is that something Strauss could embrace without compromise? Did Strauss ever know of Polanyi's work and did he make any comments about Polanyi's ideas?
- Does a Polanyian *post-critical* understanding of reason and faith differ in important respects from a *pre-critical* (pre-modern) understanding? If so, in what ways? Differently put, does Strauss's reappropriation of a pre-modern understanding of rationality differ in any significant respect from Polanyi's post-critical understanding of reasoned inquiry? If so, in what respects?
- Does Polanyi's sustained and outspoken advocacy of Freedom of Thought (especially of science but also of other disciplines of thought) fall under Strauss's understanding of the theologico-political problem? And if so, does it change things any? Does it call for a different set of alternative answers than are covered in Jon's paper?

- What is “reason” for Polanyi, and does it coincide or depart from Strauss’s understanding of “reason,” especially given Strauss’s emphasis on philosophical reason as a way of conducting one’s life?
- Strauss’s understanding of “revelation” and “religious faith” seems to me pretty narrowly circumscribed around Scripture, both what its prophets explicitly say, and what it means or implies for believers. There is a ton of things here involved of a more or less “factual” nature that Strauss leaves undiscussed (in Jon’s account). Isn’t the picture a bit more complicated than Strauss’s account allows, forcing the position of the believer to rely upon rational inquiry to discern the reliability of the text, what it is that has actually been revealed (as well as determining what it is in the first place to have something “revealed” and have it be authoritative), and how that is to be rightly appropriated? What about Scriptural texts whose meaning is not clear and unambiguous on the surface?
- In connection with this last question or questions, cannot the impulse to inquire philosophically naturally and appropriately arise within the believer her/himself and even be a part of her/his journey of faith? Do we not have numerous paradigm precedents of *philosophers who are themselves persons of faith*, going back to the first century and beyond? Why need the philosopher be set outside (or even alongside) the position of believer, as Strauss conceives it? Does having the philosopher and the believer be the same person make the t-p problem any different? If so, in what ways?
- What might Polanyi make of other theological articulations of the relationship of reason and revelation than that of Tillich? What about H. Richard Niebuhr, Thomas Torrance, or Charles McCoy’s articulations, which were in significant respects influenced by Polanyi’s own epistemological reflections (and which differed significantly from

Tillich's theological modernism)? Or those of mainstream pre-modern philosophical theology? How would these ideas make a difference?