

**Confronting or Denying the Minotaur: “Moral Inversion” Today**  
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*Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain.*

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 169

*Abstract: In “Confronting the Minotaur: Moral Inversion and Polanyi’s Moral Philosophy,” D.M. Yeager says that diagnosing moral inversion and devising a remedy for it was Polanyi’s “social objective.” The Minotaur is Polanyi’s metaphor for the monstrous social order generated by moral inversion. For Polanyi, it was totalitarian government. For me, and many others in the twenty-first century, it is the social order that prevented economic and political leaders from acting to stop, or even delay, climate catastrophe. The number of people who deny the reality of this Minotaur has been decreasing but the social order in which moral inversion is prevalent provides an illusion of progress even as it generates the inevitable decline of industrial civilization. I argue environmental activists who urge us to take decisive action “before it’s too late” are denying, rather than confronting, the fact that it’s already too late. Polanyi’s fiduciary program, his remedy for moral inversion, cannot prevent civilizational collapse, but it can aid us to achieve the “deep adaptation” advocated by Jem Bendell. His “map” for navigating climate tragedy includes reconciliation and love, which are authentic elements in the Christian tradition, as well as many non-Christian traditions.*

“Thirty years ago, we could have saved the planet.” This sentence is written in white letters on the black cover of *The New York Times Magazine* for August 5, 2018. There is just one article in this issue, Nathaniel Rich’s “Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change. A Tragedy in Two Acts.” Totalitarianism, especially that of the Soviet Union was the twentieth-century Minotaur Michael Polanyi confronted. Climate catastrophe is the Minotaur we must confront in the twenty-first century. Because many people realize this, Jem Bendell’s online essay “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy” (2018) went viral.<sup>1</sup> Bendell is still working on his map, writing blogs, speaking, conducting workshops and retreats. His map originally had three parts: resilience, relinquishment and restoration. He later added reconciliation and love, as a result of conversations with Charles Eisenstein (Bendell 2019). In this essay, I relate these four points to Michael Polanyi’s “moral inversion” and his remedy for it, the “fiduciary program.”

“The Fiduciary Programme” is the title to part twelve, the last part, of chapter nine of *Personal Knowledge*, “The Logic of Affirmation.” I quote the final two paragraphs because the language and images he uses are important for understanding what he meant by “moral inversion” and the “fiduciary program.”

This invitation to dogmatism [the fiduciary program] may appear shocking; yet it is but the corollary to the greatly increased critical powers of man. These have endowed our mind with a capacity for self-transcendence of which we can never again divest ourselves. We have plucked from the Tree a second apple

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<sup>1</sup> Neither the 2018 essay nor the texts on his website have page numbers.

which has for ever imperiled our knowledge of Good and Evil, and we must learn to know these qualities henceforth in the blinding light of our new analytical powers. Humanity has been deprived a second time of its innocence, and driven out of another garden which was, at any rate, a Fool's Paradise. Innocently, we had trusted that we could be relieved of all personal responsibility for our beliefs by objective criteria of validity -- and our own critical powers have shattered this hope. Struck by our sudden nakedness, we may try to brazen it out by flaunting it in a profession of nihilism. But modern man's immorality is unstable. Presently his moral passions reassert themselves in objectivist disguise and the scientific Minotaur is born.

The alternative to this, which I am seeking to establish here, is to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs. We should be able to profess now knowingly and openly those beliefs which could be tacitly taken for granted in the days before modern philosophic criticism reached its present incisiveness. Such powers may appear dangerous. But a dogmatic orthodoxy can be kept in check both internally and externally, while a creed inverted into a science is both blind and deceptive (PK 268).

In the first paragraph, Polanyi moves from Biblical imagery -- the apple and the loss Paradise -- to imagery from a Greek myth -- the Minotaur. In the second paragraph, Polanyi points to the "dangerous" alternative to moral inversion: "the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs." What he meant by moral inversion is intimately connected to what he meant by "the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs." This aspect of Polanyi's fiduciary program attacks the nihilistic consequences of "the blinding light of our new analytical powers." This is connected to the subtitle of *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Polanyi said that the "principal purpose of this book is to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false" (PK 214).

Jon Fennell uses an image from this passage in "Balance of Mind': Polanyi's Response to the Second Apple and the Modern Predicament" (2018). D.M. Yeager draws on the its imagery and language in "Confronting the Minotaur: Moral Inversion and Polanyi's Moral Philosophy" (2002-3, 23) and "'The Deliberate Holding of Unproven Beliefs': Judgment Post-Critically Considered" (2008).

Using the language of George Lakoff (2002, 9-10), I will treat moral qualities of a person who has embraced Polanyi's fiduciary program as being in the "ideal type" of moral state. I will treat the moral qualities of a morally inverted person as being in an "anti-ideal type" of moral orientation. By treating these as ideal and anti-ideal types, I am saying that they aren't descriptions of actual persons. They are prototypes or central models in the larger category of moral states. They are conceptual tools for thinking, talking and writing about the moral states of actual persons. The closer an actual person is to the *ideal* type, the more likely it is that she will be able to follow Bendall's "map," to be resilient, and capable of relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation. The closer a person is to the *anti-ideal* type, the less likely it is that he will be resilient or capable of relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation.

In "Confronting the Minotaur," Yeager says that it's fair to say that the social objective of Polanyi's thinking and writing from 1946 to 1975 was to work out the implications of moral inversion and to explain his alternative to it (2002-3, 23). A good part of that essay consists in answering some harsh criticisms of moral inversion by Zdzislaw Nadjer (1968). In "'The Deliberate Holding of Unproven Beliefs'," (2008), she focuses on clarifying Polanyi's stated alternative to moral inversion. In "Exploring the Underground: Silent Assumptions and Social Pathologies," she notes that since writing "Confronting the Minotaur" she has come to believe that moral passions are more central to Polanyi's philosophy and complex than she had realized (2013-14, 23, endnote 5). The centrality follows from the notion that diagnosing and finding a remedy for moral inversion was the social objective of Polanyi's philosophy. Moral inversion is a fusion of moral passion with a hyper-critical rejection of all traditional moral precepts. Her admission that the notion is more complex than she had realized echoes what her mentor, William Poteat, said in *Polanyian Meditations* about returning to the study of Polanyi after the dramatic change in his thinking that resulted from his encounters with the Greek sculptor Evangelos Moustakis:

Returning to Polanyi, I discovered equivocations, complexities -- and profundities -- I had not hitherto noticed. He was more difficult, more radical than I had been able to see or say when, in 1967, I had sat down to write the introduction to *Intellect and Hope*, "Upon First Sitting Down to Read *Personal Knowledge...*" (1985,8).

There are other anti-ideal types of moral states, such as the habitual sinner and the psychopath. Explaining how these types differ from the morally inverted person will serve to clarify the elements in Polanyi's anti-ideal type. "Sin" isn't a key term for Polanyi, but "conscience" is. By "sin," I don't mean disobedience to a divine commandment, but a refusal to be guided by conscience.<sup>2</sup> I contrast "sinner" with "saint." What I mean by "saint" is a person who perseveres in trying to follow her conscience.<sup>3</sup> A person who faithfully follows Polanyi's fiduciary program is a kind of secular saint, but an ordinary habitual sinner is different from a moral invert. The path to moral inversion is complex. It's a movement from intense critical reasoning to nihilism, and from nihilism to a morally self-righteous rejection of traditional moral standards.

The psychopath doesn't sin, in the sense of refusing to follow his conscience, because he has no conscience. Robert Hare conducted some of the definitive early research on psychopathy, and reported his findings in *Without Conscience: The*

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<sup>2</sup> Books that explore the nature of conscience include Walter Conn, *Conscience: Development and Self-Transcendence* (1981); Darcia Narvaez, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality* (2014); Patricia Churchland, *Conscience: the Origins of Moral Intuition* (2019).

<sup>3</sup> I don't mean a person who has been officially canonized as a "Saint" by the Roman Catholic Church.

*Disturbing World of Psychopaths Among Us* (1993).<sup>4</sup> The lack of conscience is connected to the lack of emotional empathy. In *Confessions of a Sociopath* (2013), M.E. Thomas says that sociopaths call those unlike them “empaths.” She isn’t a moral invert. She is a wife and mother, a lawyer, and a Sunday school teacher. She knows, follows and teaches traditional moral standards. But she also knows that because of her lack of emotional empathy, she could break moral rules against hurting or killing others without feeling any guilt or shame. Psychopaths of normal verbal intelligence are very well able to learn the moral rules of their communities but lack the emotional support empathy provides for conforming to those standards. Because of this, it is emotionally easier for them than for empaths to get ahead at the expense of others. According to Thomas, many psychopaths regard this as a distinct advantage in our highly competitive society. But many of them believe that it’s also to their advantage to deceive others into thinking that they do empathize with them. Hare (1993, 114) says: “Psychopaths are very good at putting on a good impression when it suits them, and they often paint their victims as the real culprits.” Their public display of morality differs from the self-righteous, and explicit, rejection of traditional morality of the morally inverted.

I said that even though “sin” isn’t a key term in Polanyi’s philosophy, “conscience” is. In “Authority and Conscience,” chapter two of *Science, Faith and Society*, Polanyi described a science student’s slow acquisition of a scientific conscience. The beginning student has to submit to the authority of his teachers and textbooks, but as he matures, he relies less on authority “and more and more on his own responsible judgments.” Polanyi drew an analogy between the attitude of the beginning science student and that of a toddler learning a language. The science student “is urged on by the belief that certain things are as yet beyond his knowledge” but are “on the whole true and valuable.” This is similar to the attitude of the child “listening to its mother’s voice and absorbing the meaning of speech” (1946, 45). The maturing of the scientist’s conscience is analogous to the maturing of conscience in other domains of society. Polanyi (1958a, 208) describes submission to authority as a “passionate pouring” of self “into untried forms of existence.” It is a “self-modifying process” that is “inherently informal, irreversible, and to this extent, a-critical.” But he also notes that “every acceptance of authority is qualified by some measure of reaction to it or even against it.” One aspect of “balance of mind” (Fennell 2018) consists of dealing with the tension between submission to, and criticism of, legitimate authority.

Marjorie Grene worked with Polanyi on *Personal Knowledge*. She says (1995-96, 8) that there’s a paragraph in the book that sums it up “in a nutshell.” “Good conscience” is central:

It is the act of commitment in its full structure that saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective. Intellectual commitment is a responsible decision, in submission to the compelling claims of what in good conscience I conceive to be true. It is an act of hope, striving to fulfil an obligation within a personal

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<sup>4</sup> Churchland (2019,130) notes that those who favor the alternative term “sociopath” generally do so as a way of stressing the importance of the social environment as causing this antisocial disorder.

situation for which I am not responsible and which therefore determines my calling. This hope and this obligation are expressed in the universal intent of personal knowledge (1958a, 65).

The moral invert is a person of bad conscience, because she is self-righteously nihilistic, denying both traditional morality and her own ability to know what is true.

For Polanyi, Marxism is an ideology that fosters and legitimates moral inversion as a personal state. In “The Magic of Marxism,” Polanyi lists some ideal virtues that, paradoxically, Marxism appears to champion by claiming that the societies that claim to endorse them are hypocritical. “And indeed,” he says (1958a, 228; Polanyi’s italics), “it is not *in spite* of this contempt for justice, equality and liberty, but *because of* it that Soviet Russia is accepted by many as the true champion of these same ideals in the fight against the very nations openly professing them.” Polanyi’s list of traditional ideals, however, is incomplete. He leaves out love, the most important ideal in the Christian tradition. It is the virtue expressed in the two most important commandments (Matthew 22: 35-40; Mark 12: 28-34; Luke 10: 27). To love God with my whole heart, soul and mind is to love with moral passion. To love my neighbor as I love myself is to love my neighbor with moral passion. Even men and women who embrace one or more of the ideals of justice, equality and liberty often dismiss the ideal of love as mere sentimentality. Polanyi doesn’t explicitly reject love as a virtue. It lurks in the background, especially in chapter seven of *Personal Knowledge*, “Conviviality.” But neither “love” nor “altruism” is in the index of *Personal Knowledge* (1958a), *The Tacit Dimension* (1966) or *Meaning* (1975).<sup>5</sup> Bendell, in contrast, added reconciliation and love to resilience, relinquishment and restoration.

Ayn Rand is a non-Marxist who passionately denied the validity of the ideal of loving your neighbor as yourself. She called her philosophy “objectivism,” and affirmed, with intense self-righteousness, that selfishness is a high moral virtue (Rand 1964). I read *The Fountainhead* (Rand 1943) in high school because an architect told me that it provided a good picture of what it’s like to be an architect. Rand’s hero, Howard Roark, disgusted me -- I decided not to become an architect. There’s no reference to Rand’s work in *Personal Knowledge*, so it might be a coincidence that in the index there are twenty-five references to “objectivism,” the name Polanyi most often used to point to the false ideal of knowing he passionately rejected. For Polanyi, Marx is the prototypical philosopher of moral inversion. Rand is my prototype for philosophical moral inversion. She explicitly, and passionately, rejects altruism, and works very hard at justifying that rejection.

I think of Bendell’s four elements as four virtues that constitute what he sees as a good conscience for our time. What I mean by “virtue” is a good habit, a psychological disposition that’s a strength, rather than a weakness. Although I focus on each in turn, they are not so much separate parts as threads that are being woven together as Bendell works out the details of his map for navigating climate tragedy.

**Resilience.** Bendell discusses work that’s been done on various kinds of

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<sup>5</sup> *The Study of Man* (1958b) has no index.

collective resilience, but his emphasis is on personal resilience. He quotes the American Psychology Association (2018):

resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences.

My emphasis is on resilience as the *ability* to bounce back rather than on the *process* of bouncing back. It is the ability that is the personal strength or virtue. Bendell cautions against thinking that bouncing back takes the stressed individual back to where he was previously. All experiences are learning experiences that change the learner irreversibly.

Although Bendell focuses on individual resilience, he recognizes that the degree to which a person is resilient is related to the degree of social support that person enjoys. The balance here is between a kind of self-accreditation, an affirmation of my personal resilience, and the recognition that I cannot be resilient without the support of others.

A key element in Polanyi's fiduciary program is personal self-accreditation. I regard this as important for resilience. Polanyi says (1958a, 265):

I have insisted on this before on diverse occasions: pointing out repeatedly that we must accredit our own judgment as the paramount arbiter of all our intellectual performances, and claiming that we are competent to pursue intellectual excellence as a token of a hidden reality.

In this text, Polanyi uses "judgment" to refer to a power or ability, rather than to the act of judging. He also uses "judgment" to refer to the acts of persons who possess this power, including the act of "holding" unproven beliefs. I extend self-accreditation beyond the affirmation of my ability to judge responsibly. I include the affirmation of my ability to bounce back after difficulties. Judgment, however, remains important, because a realistic self-accreditation must include the recognition that some of the things that can threaten me can result in injury, illness, or death. Resilience is not equivalent to the denial of death (Becker 1973)

**Relinquishment.** Bendell emphasizes voluntary, rather than involuntary, relinquishment:

It involves people and communities letting go of certain assets, behaviours and beliefs where retaining them could make matters worse. Examples include withdrawing from coastlines, shutting down vulnerable industrial facilities, or giving up expectations for certain types of consumption.

Involuntary relinquishment of material things is "deprivation." Involuntary relinquishment of beliefs, "disillusionment." Consumerism is a major obstacle to the voluntary relinquishment of material things.

Tihamér Margitay (2016) describes consumerism itself as moral inversion. After reviewing the texts in which Polanyi wrote about moral inversion, he constructed two characterizations of it:

- (1) Moral inversion is a process when extrinsic values become intrinsic moral values.
- (2) Moral inversion is a process when value-free things become -- covertly and in a roundabout way -- vested with values. Thereby, morally neutral things become the object of moral passion (2016, 105).

He adds that “moral inversion” can point to a personal *state*, as well as a process. The process is one in which a person changes from consuming in order to sustain life to making consuming a morally valued end in itself. -- “living to eat” instead of “eating to live.” A person who is morally inverted in this way will be less resilient when faced with the impossibility of persisting in her habits of consumption.

This kind of moral inversion is closely related to the ideology of perpetual economic growth. It’s said that the economist Kenneth Boulding said: “Anyone who thinks that you can have infinite growth in a finite environment is either a madman or an economist.” Whether or not Boulding actually said this, it resonates with the message of *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.* 1972; 2004). But the world seems to be full of the kinds of madmen and economists who are morally passionate in their advocacy of perpetual economic growth. If moral inversion fosters both consumerism and the ideology of perpetual economic growth, how can Polanyi’s fiduciary program help? I don’t think that my embracing of his fiduciary program has reduced either the number of consumerists or the popularity of the ideology of perpetual economic growth. I do believe, however, that following the fiduciary program makes me value the pursuit of truth more than the pursuit of ever more material things. And valuing truth prevents me from believing the ideology of infinite economic growth.

An aspect of the fiduciary program is what Polanyi says is the “acceptance of calling.” This is the title of the last subsection of chapter ten of *Personal Knowledge*, “Commitment.” The first sentences of chapter ten foreshadow the final section (1958a, 299; Polanyi’s italics):

*‘I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.’* This sentence, summarizing my fiduciary program, conveys an ultimate belief which I find myself holding. Its assertion must therefore prove consistent with its content by practising what it authorizes. I add to Polanyi’s formulation of his calling to say that I am called upon to search for the truth, and then to speak, write and behave in ways that are consistent with what I believe to be true. Consistency between what I believe, what I say, and what I do is *performative consistency*. To follow my conscience is to be performatively consistent, and this has a moral quality to it to a much greater degree than *logical consistency*, the consistency between the sentences I speak or write.

**Restoration.** Bendell is not advocating the restoration of all the material things and ideological beliefs that must be relinquished as a result of the collapse of industrial civilization. He says this:

It involves people and communities rediscovering attitudes and approaches to life and organisation that our hydrocarbon-fuelled civilisation eroded. Examples include re-wilding landscapes, so they provide more ecological benefits and require less management, changing diets back to match the seasons,

rediscovering non-electronically powered forms of play, and increased community-level productivity and support.

The collapse that is being brought about by climate change, and is being accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, will prevent any return to "business as usual."

**Reconciliation.** "The Love in Deep Adaptation – A Philosophy for the Forum" (2019) is a blog by Bendell and Katie Carr. They say:

Since birth we have been invited to "other" people and nature. We often assume other people to be less valuable, smart or ethical as us. Or we assume we know what they think. We justify that in many ways, using stories of nationality, gender, morals, personal survival, or simply being "too busy". Similarly, we have been encouraged to see nature as separate from us. Therefore, we have not regarded the rivers, soils, forests and fields as part of ourselves. Taken together, this othering of people and nature means we dampen any feelings of connection or empathy to such a degree that we can justify exploitation, discrimination, hostility, violence, and rampant consumption.

I said that Polanyi's list of the traditional virtues despised by Marx is incomplete. He omits love, the virtue at the heart of the Christian tradition. The text by Bendell and Carr, therefore, complements Polanyi's account. In an inverse way, Rand's writings also complement Polanyi, because she focuses on altruism and love of neighbor as the objects of her passionate contempt. I agree with Bendell and Carr in that the "othering" of people and nature dampens empathy and compassion. But so also does the kind of moral inversion that expresses contempt for the love of neighbors. Ayn Rand's philosophy provides an ideological justification selfishness and greed. So do at least some versions of neo-liberal economics (Hedges 2018).

The psychopaths among us are likely to join hands with the moral inverts in rejecting love and reconciliation as legitimate virtues. And these are the kinds of persons that will interfere with reconciliation of different groups and categories of people in times of scarcity. By saying this, I don't intend to criticize Bendell and Carr's emphasis on love. They recognize that scarcity and involuntary relinquishment will promote hostility and violence. These conditions make it more likely that psychopaths and moral inverts will rise to positions of leadership.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, my focus has been on how Polanyi's fiduciary program might be helpful in achieving deep adaptation. In writing for and speak to an audience of Polanyians, I'm feel confident that my audience agrees with me about the importance of the fiduciary program, even though some are likely to interpret it differently than I. But I am much less confident that many members of my audience will agree with me (and Nash and Bendell) about climate catastrophe or the need for something like Bendell's map for navigating climate tragedy. I have written this essay out of a commitment to fostering conversations about the high probability of the collapse of our industrial civilization, and the possibility that we will be one of the species participating in the ongoing sixth extinction (Kolbert ). I'm convinced that those who achieve a moral state

that's close to the ideal state Bendell describes have a better chance of living a good life than those who do not. I say this as a personal example of trying to achieve a frame of mind in which I'm able to hold on to my convictions, even though I know that I might be mistaken.

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