

A Polanyian Encounter with John 3:16-21

Not so long ago, acquaintance with the passage below, typically memorized as a child, was for many a sign of initiation into our civilization and an expected mark of literacy itself:

For God so loveth the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.¹

This is, of course, John 3:16. Not so readily recognizable, and seldom memorized, are the two verses that follow:

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but *he that believeth not is condemned already*, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.²

What will prove of special interest as we explore these verses in light of the fiduciary philosophy of Michael Polanyi is what Jesus then says in explanation of the consequences for those who do not believe, and for those who do:

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, *that they are wrought in God*.³

These passages, John 3:16-21, are the occasion for the inquiry which follows. Its thesis is twofold: first, that Michael Polanyi's fiduciary philosophical edifice, especially as it unfolds in the closing crescendo of *Personal Knowledge*, is uniquely illuminated by what is asserted in these verses; and second, that what is stated at the end of and at other critical junctures in *Personal Knowledge* is equally revealing in coming to understand what is said here by Jesus.

The Polanyian Project

In the final pages of *Personal Knowledge* we find one of the most moving of the many striking personal statements that permeate this book:

While the first rise of living individuals overcame the meaninglessness of the universe by establishing in it centres of subjective interests, the rise of human thought in its turn overcame these subjective interests by its universal intent. The first revolution was incomplete, for a self-centred life ending in death has little meaning. The second revolution aspires to eternal meaning, but owing to the finitude of man's condition it too remains blatantly incomplete. Yet the precarious foothold gained by man in the realm of ideas lends sufficient meaning to his brief existence; the inherent stability of man seems to me adequately supported and certified by his submission to ideals which I believe to be universal. (389)

This affiliation with and participation in the universal by eminently finite and intrinsically limited and vulnerable creatures (that is, we humans) is the supreme episode (thus far) in a "great spectacle, the spectacle of anthropogenesis" (389). Such affiliation and participation depend on the individual entering into what Polanyi, borrowing from Teilhard de Chardin, calls "the noosphere" (388). Polanyi is exhilarated, though altogether humbled, by what this act makes possible.

Before examining the conditions enabling this possibility (a matter that might be said to be the central concern of *Personal Knowledge*) we should say a few words about the odd concepts—anthropogenesis and noosphere—employed here by Polanyi.

Just as St. Augustine in his *Confessions* encourages the reader to join him in witnessing in one's life the determining majestic hand of God, Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* invites us to participate in his survey of the evolutionary drama and to recognize therein an unfolding that issues in both a meaningful present and what may well be a limitlessly significant future. Should we do so, we would see that "the appearance of the human mind has been so far the ultimate stage in the awakening of the world" and would understand that "all that has gone before, the strivings of a myriad centres that have taken the risks of living and believing, seem to have all been pursuing, along rival lines, the aim now achieved by us up to this point" (405). For Polanyi this realization of real and potential meaning is itself the central purpose of the unfolding. The *raison d'être* of the process (which is, fundamentally, the emergence of life from inanimate matter) is the comprehension of it. It is our personal responsibility to discover meaning in what would otherwise be utter vacuity. Human fruition consists of appreciating that which is

revealed: “man takes his place as the creature by which the universe knows itself.”⁴ And what was for St. Augustine the will and design of God is for Polanyi the evolutionary fact of anthropogenesis (which, quite possibly, is the product of “a cosmic field” that is plausibly understood as God [405]).

As the term indicates, anthropogenesis refers to “the rise of man” (which is the title of the concluding chapter of *Personal Knowledge*). There is an ambiguity here: the phrase might refer either to the appearance in the world of a particular individual or to the emergence from submicroscopic life (and, before that, “inanimate origins” [383]) of humanity as a whole. Polanyi means both. After all, the appearance of the individual presupposes that of the whole, and meaningful reference to the whole presupposes the presence of constituent individuals. The meaning that is of primary concern to Polanyi occurs personally. Yet, such meaning is the product of acquaintance and affiliation with what mankind has come to know and articulate. That product, communion with which is a necessary condition for escape from meaninglessness, is “the noosphere.” The noosphere, the progeny of anthropogenesis, is the enduring distillate of “noogenesis,” the “ultimate evolutionary step by which human knowledge was born” (388). Consisting of what Polanyi elsewhere terms “superior knowledge” (374-79),⁵ the noosphere “was achieved by men who, forming societies, invented language and created by it a lasting articulate framework of thought” (388).

How does a person affiliate with and participate in the noosphere? We find the beginning of an answer when Polanyi states, “noogenesis created a new fabric of life *not* centred on individuals [as it is for lesser creatures] and transcending the natural death of individuals.” Significantly, he adds, “When man participates in this life his body ceases to be merely an instrument of self-indulgence and becomes a condition of his calling” (389).⁶ In short, then, we affiliate with and participate in the noosphere by following our “calling.” But what is our calling and what is the “condition” for it? Polanyi earlier discusses these matters in detail. At the close of Chapter 10 of *Personal Knowledge* (titled “Commitment”), he observes that every human individual is born into and is reared under contingent circumstances that necessarily greatly determine what we believe and even what we can believe. “Our believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging. And this reliance on the cultural machinery of our society continues throughout life” (322). For many observers this fact is crippling: the unavoidable influence of our contingent particular circumstances “would reduce all our convictions to the mere products

of a particular location and interest” (322). Therefore, any attempt “to arrive at a responsible judgment with universal intent” (i.e., one not fatally colored by the contingent and local) must be fanciful and in vain. Yet, Polanyi is not daunted: “But I do not accept this conclusion. Believing as I do in the justification of deliberate intellectual commitments, I accept these accidents of personal existence as the concrete opportunities for exercising our personal responsibility. *This acceptance is the sense of my calling*” (322). One’s contingent and local circumstances, which might otherwise be regarded as an insuperable barrier to satisfaction of universal aspirations, are construed by Polanyi as an opportunity: “I have formed my most fundamental beliefs by exercising my native intelligence within the social milieu of a particular place and time. I shall submit to this fact as defining the conditions within which I am called upon to exercise my responsibility” (322-323). Within those conditions (and only within them) are found the seeds capable of sprouting into a comprehension so grand as to be scarcely imaginable.⁷ What makes this possible, according to Polanyi, is submission to an honest assessment of our circumstances married to an ongoing affirmation of what they make possible (viz., achievement of “man’s destiny” [387]). It is our calling to commit to a vision of liberation and to labor in light of it. “I believe...that as I am called upon to live and die in this body...so I am called upon to acquire the instruments of intelligence from my early surroundings and to use these particular instruments to fulfil the universal obligations to which I am subject” (323). We are “to make up our minds about the whole range of matters with which man is properly concerned” and, in doing so, “[o]ur personhood is assured by our simultaneous contact with universal aspirations which place us in a transcendent perspective” (324).

Some Christian Elements of the Polanyian Vision

With clarification of these central concepts as a foundation, let us now address the first of our primary tasks. How does John 3:16-21 illuminate Polanyi’s fiducial quest for meaning? In responding, we return to the question left in abeyance above: What for Polanyi makes affiliation with and participation in the universal possible? The words of John 3:16-21 show the way.

We are told in John 3:16 that “whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” In such belief we have the model for the affirmation at the center of Polanyi’s “calling.” There is a choice to be made. Much is promised to those who choose properly. But the fruits are not present at the outset and thus the reality to which they refer cannot serve as

justification for the initial commitment. Therefore, accepting our calling and acting accordingly depends on trust in the prospect of achievement. It requires faith. As we consider Polanyi's invitation to share his perspective on the evolutionary spectacle of anthropogenesis, and then to strive in light of its promise, we are reminded of Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."⁸ Even more explicit is Romans 8:24: "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?"⁹ In John 3:16, then, Jesus clarifies what it means to accept "man's destiny" (PK, 387) as well as what is necessary in order to do so. There is the *promise* of meaning, available in spite of all the evident obstacles. But the opening move in the journey is belief in its very possibility and faith in the reality of a subsequent consummation. Even the meaning experienced through moving forward depends on ongoing belief that the enterprise is not illusory as well as faith that the effort will issue in real significance. Certainty of outcome is not reasonably to be expected. Thus, to require certainty as the necessary grounds for action is never to start at all. We are instead invited to invest our hopes in hope itself, and to have faith in faith. As Josef Piper observes, "belief has the extraordinary property of endowing the believer with knowledge that would not be available to him by the exercise of his own powers."¹⁰ Here, both in Piper's words and in that to which they refer, is a supreme instance of "superior knowledge."

The alternative to affiliation with and participation in the noosphere is also captured by the verses from John. For Polanyi this woeful condition is understood as the absence or depletion of meaning. Death under this perspective bodes a decisive end, the termination without residue of a naturalistic process. Truly, this is to "perish" (John 3:16), a fate from which we are saved only through "submission to ideals I believe to be universal."

The parallels thus far noted are readily apparent. This is an unsurprising consequence of the familiarity of John 3:16. Less obvious parallels emerge in the verses that follow. John 3:18, for example, states that he who does not believe "is condemned [or sentenced] already." Verse 17 has, in addition, told us that God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn, but rather to save us. It is not His role to punish. Rather, perishing is our own doing. It consists of the ongoing alienation from the son of God that is the consequence of refusing to believe. Perishing is thus not the result of something done to us but is instead the very meaning of being unable or unwilling to affiliate with and participate in the ideal. In Polanyian terms one has failed to

exercise the responsibility that constitutes his calling. As a result, genuine fruition (“personhood”) is beyond our reach.

The references to evil in John 3:19 and 20 also are telling. As we have noted, the sentence or condemnation for the nonbeliever is to fail to see the light. The evil mentioned here by Jesus is a narrowmindedness and lack of imagination reflected in the preference for remaining in the dark, that is, for adhering to a perspective in which eternal life has no purchase. For, to take seriously the prospect promised by Jesus would demonstrate the essential vacuity of that in terms of which one had heretofore identified and with which one continues to be preoccupied. “Evil” is the call of the lesser and unyielding attachment to it. Exposure of this condition—that it is merely human, all too human, and destined for oblivion—consists of being “reproved” (John 3:20).¹¹ From a Polanyian perspective what Jesus is here describing is the failure to accept the calling to submit to the universal (thereby enabling moral and thus spiritual excellence) that is attributable to an incomplete and hence flawed insight (resulting from a malfunctioning at the lower yet sustaining level of the intellect).¹² More specifically, the individual recognizes the fact of his belonging to and being a product of a contingent particular time and place, but refuses to acknowledge and act upon the possibility of affiliation with something beyond (namely, the universal). Living in conformity with this restricted perspective, such an individual comes to accept as a given, and perhaps even to love, the circumscribed domain in which he elects to reside. This is a territory in which the fact of particularity, in the service of reductionism, casts a powerful shadow of doubt that renders perpetually suspect any attempt at justification or legitimation. In such a place, home to such doctrines as scientism, naturalism, and materialism, the prospect of eternal meaning through submission to the ideal is fanciful and likely an object of derision.

Nevertheless, the Polanyian vision persists as made clear by John 3:21. In his *Confessions* St. Augustine shows that it is possible to recognize in one’s life the unfolding of the divine. Polanyi invites the reader to join him as he discerns comparable meaning under the heading of anthropogenesis. Our existence both as individuals and a species, including the very act of understanding what is therein taking place, is an aspect of a meaningful whole. All that has transpired, as well as our part in it, may through “universal intent” be understood if only we allow this to occur. The “stability of man” is therefore secured through willing communion with the divine.

Polanyian Dimensions of Perishing, Evil, and Everlasting Life

We now attend to our second primary task. How does Polanyi's fiduciary philosophy cast useful light on John 3:16-21? Let us begin by noting that Polanyi several times in *Personal Knowledge* affirms the genius of Christianity while asserting that it constitutes the paradigmatic model for the self-reflexive and hence remarkably consistent system of thought that unfolds in this book. The most extended discussion of Christianity occurs in Chapter 9, "The Critique of Doubt," in a section titled "Religious Doubt." Given the centrality of belief in John 3:16-21, it is appropriate that we commence our account of the bearing on it of Polanyi's fiduciary position with a review of the key claims and concepts found under this heading.

Polanyi states that "[t]he Christian faith can be attacked by doubt in two ways" (285). To understand the first of these it is necessary to know that, on his view, to say that God exists is not an ontological claim (an assertion of fact) but rather an affirmation of belief. In clarifying this position Polanyi refers to the distinction, familiar in epistemological circles, between "Snow is white" (an assertion of fact) and "'Snow is white' is true" (on Polanyi's account, a personal affirmation of belief). The latter, avers Polanyi, is not an empirical statement that can be tested: "There is therefore no possibility either for doubting what we do (or declare we do) in the sense in which an explicit statement can be doubted" (285). So, if one comes to doubt "God exists" (or "Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God") it must be due to another factor, namely, a diminution in the confidence of the assertion, i.e., a degree of hesitancy. This is the first form of doubt by which the Christian faith may be attacked. That which may be responsible for erosion of confidence will occupy our attention shortly.

The second form of doubt has more complex roots. For Polanyi, Christian faith is characterized by an "inherent dubiety" that, even in the presence of passionate belief, is never fully erased. Such "internal dubiety" is not fatal and, in fact, Polanyi believes it is "indispensable." It can, however, "be increased, even to the point of destroying our faith altogether, by explicit critical tests of the articulate framework on which we rely for deploying our faith" (285). As is so often the case with Polanyi, the key term here is "rely." Although many of the central tenets of Christian faith are not empirical claims but rather affirmations of belief, the occasion and thus the capacity for such affirmation is dependent on a "framework" of fact which *is* subject to empirical confirmation. This framework, which "will be used by

dwelling in it” (195), is a necessary ancillary element to Christian worship. To the degree that the supportive framework of fact is undermined, so too is the faith that relies on it. Thus, Polanyi observes, history- and science-based attacks on religion by rationalists over the prior 300 years have resulted in a great reduction in “the total volume of belief” (286).¹³ It will prove important to our account, however, to note that this loss of faith is for Polanyi an unavoidable, necessary, and ultimately salutary step in a welcome maturation. The victories of rationalism have led to supersession of a naivete (whose demise was inevitable) by a subsequent reformulation of the supporting framework that leaves Christian faith potentially stronger than ever. While the assertion that the world began in 4004 BC, for example, is no longer tenable, nothing has been authoritatively established by history or science that casts doubt on the assertion that Jesus lived, taught, and was executed. Even rationalist critics concede that the surrounding historical and social context did exist. A sufficient framework thus endures upon which to predicate Christian faith. Still, since the reliance on framework persists, so too does the possibility of associated renewed waves of doubt.

As we look at what for Polanyi either of these two forms of doubt impedes, the significance of his account for John 3:16-21 emerges. At the heart of Polanyi’s account of Christian faith we find the following:

A heuristic impulse can live only in the pursuit of its proper enquiry. The Christian enquiry is worship. The words of prayer and confession, the actions of the ritual, the sermon, the church itself, are the clues of the worshipper’s striving towards God. They guide his feelings of contrition and gratitude and his craving for the divine presence, while keeping him safe from distracting thoughts. (281)

What this passage makes clear is that for Polanyi the Christian life consists essentially of an effort to integrate largely tacit clues into a meaningful whole. Here, as in any instance of personal knowing, integration is a skillful act of comprehension—one that in this case is normally learned as a child and is only with difficulty learned by someone who lacked appropriate early formation.¹⁴ Given the commitment required in order to exercise the skillful act of integration (and thus to prompt subsequent fruition), it is evident how the hesitancy and underlying loss of confidence constituted by the first form of doubt is toxic to Christian faith. A primary cause of such hesitancy is “fear of losing our hold on reality” (285), the reality heretofore authoritative and which, were one to abandon oneself to the Christian prospect, may

possibly be lost forever. Polanyi notes that there is here “reluctance to accept the [new] habitation offered to our minds” (285). This stance may be “craven or wise.” Whatever its stature, due to its influence the belief called for in John 3:16 is impossible.

But commitment and associated effort are alone insufficient. Also required are appropriate clues to be integrated. These may include the rituals of the Christian service as well as a wide range of concrete surrounding factors including, perhaps, even the fragrance of burning incense.¹⁵ Some of these are more important than others. Included among the indispensable clues are the contents of the “articulate framework” (285), noted above, upon which the exercise of faith relies. This explains the impact of the second form of doubt. If clues deemed necessary for integration are absent, the act of comprehension will not occur, whatever we might wish to be the case. This is because commitment to Christian faith inescapably coexists with commitment to the principles which for an individual define intellectual integrity. (The strength and content of these principles, however, do vary over time and by place.)

Let us now consider the central features of John 3:16-21 in light of Polanyi’s account of religious doubt. What first strikes us is that the belief that leads to everlasting life is the product of worship, at heart an act of surrender, issuing in successful skillful integration of clues. But while in the case of games and puzzles successful integration leads to a “breaking out” (i.e., a relaxation of the tension, born of “our craving for mental dissatisfaction” [196], that defines the search for relief), such a resolution, says Polanyi, is not available for the Christian. Rather, “the dwelling of the Christian worshipper within the ritual of divine service differs from any other dwelling within a framework of inherent excellence, by the fact that this indwelling is not enjoyed” (198). The tension instead mounts:

By these ritual acts the worshipper accepts the obligation to achieve what he knows to be beyond his own unaided powers and strives towards it in the hope of a merciful visitation from above. The ritual of worship is expressly designed to induce and sustain this state of anguish, surrender and hope. The moment a man were to claim that he had arrived and could now happily contemplate his own perfection, he would be thrown back into spiritual emptiness. (198)

Polanyi then concludes that “[t]he indwelling of the Christian worshipper is therefore *a continued attempt* at breaking out, at casting off the condition of man, even *while humbly acknowledging its inescapability*. Such indwelling is fulfilled most completely when it increases

this effort to the utmost” (198-199; emphasis added). Revealing the profound personal impact upon him of the Christian life, Polanyi is compelled to add,

Christian worship sustains...*an eternal, never to be consummated* hunch: a heuristic vision which is accepted for the sake of its unresolvable tension. It is like an obsession with a problem known to be insoluble, which yet follows, against reason, unswervingly, the heuristic command: ‘Look at the unknown!’ Christianity sedulously fosters, and in a sense *permanently satisfies*, man’s *craving for mental dissatisfaction* by offering him the comfort of a crucified God. (199; emphasis added)

Man yearns to break out and thereby see. “Men need a purpose which bears on eternity.”¹⁶ Responding, without end, to this need is the heart of Christianity for Polanyi.¹⁷

If it is in principle impossible for Christian worship (integration) to result in a decisive enduring breakthrough, and if doubt is in the end ineradicable, then we need to regard in a special light the “evil” mentioned in John 3:19 and the condemnation prominent both there and in the preceding verse. Inability to transcend bodily existence, and the intimately related human perspective, is the occasion (a precious one) for attempting to do precisely that. The Christian prospect, in conjunction with the wherewithal to commit oneself to it, is a gift to be prized above all else. But it is a questionably stern judgment—questionably stern in light of the Christian prospect itself—to indict under these circumstances the fact of falling short. As verse 19 by its reference to love suggests, it is not so much the result that is properly to be judged as it is the motivation, which is to say the decision regarding that to which one would be attached. On the Polanyian analysis, eternal life is the fruit of believing in the prospect of its attainment—of committing to and giving oneself over to the possibility thereof. One might say that we approach the divine through the very aspiration toward it.¹⁸ Success is movement toward greater understanding along what Polanyi refers to as a “gradient.” Such movement may be understood as the overcoming of impediments (attachments as well as the distracting thoughts mentioned by Polanyi in connection with worship). But it is even more aptly defined, positively, as burgeoning belief and, ultimately, belief in belief—acceptance of our calling. In an echo of St. Augustine, Polanyi in the closing crescendo of *Personal Knowledge* states, “Looking back from this

point...we realize that all that we see...is shaped by what we now ultimately believe” (404). This, and this alone, is the path to salvation.¹⁹

Reflections on the Alliance

For Polanyi, then, the everlasting life promised by John 3:16, to the degree that it is meaningful to speak of it, is possible only for those who, through trust and acceptance of calling, permit it to occur. It is dependent on “self-control” (388) and “self-compulsion with universal intent” (318; 396). That is, by submitting to an ideal one believes to be universal (389), one achieves the genuine freedom that consists in electing to accept as one’s own destiny the consummation offered by the Christian prospect. In this unfolding, decision and judgment are central. Because the fruition exists only through commitment to it, there is, in establishing its reality, a vital eminently personal role for the human individual.

The Polanyian encounter with John 3:16-21 raises a number of interesting yet troubling questions. In articulating the first of these it is necessary to return to the perspective on Polanyi’s project that was afforded by these verses. We saw that for Polanyi we achieve eternal life—life beyond “this mortal coil”—through affiliation with and participation in the universal via submission to the greatness of the noosphere. In the absence of such affiliation and participation, the existence of a particular human being has little more significance than did that of any of the countless amoeba and paramecium that have come and gone over the eons. We are spared this unsettling if not horrifying fate, says Polanyi, by accepting our calling and adopting an Augustinian perspective of a larger drama and our place within it. But what about the prospect of utter eradication—annihilation without a trace—of man’s presence in the universe? What becomes of meaning when the concerned person is faced with a future in which it is as if the source of meaning had never existed?

A second question arises out of Polanyi’s unconventional account of Christian worship and, more precisely, the portrayal of human nature upon which it is based. A central element of the genius of Christianity, it will be recalled, is that it “sedulously fosters, and in a sense permanently satisfies, man’s craving for mental dissatisfaction” (by offering the “comfort” of the incredible notion of a crucified [and dead and reborn] God). Polanyi then adds that doubt is inherent to human cognition and, in regard to the fundamental Christian claim, will never be decisively overcome. But this for Polanyi simply amplifies the genius of the enterprise, for its

fruits are directly proportional to the intensity of the effort to achieve what in fact cannot be done. Is it uncharitable to ask whether this account of ultimate human grandeur, where comfort comes through and is defined in terms of ongoing stimulus of dissatisfaction, might not be perverse? Is this in fact how humanity is constituted and the best that it can do?

A third question is even more significant. Paradoxically serving as the keystone to Polanyi's entire enterprise is the section of *Personal Knowledge* titled "The Fiduciary Programme."²⁰ Here, looking back on human history, Polanyi notes that "when the supernatural authority of laws, churches and sacred texts had waned or collapsed, man tried to avoid the emptiness of mere self-assertion by establishing over himself the authority of experience and reason" (265). But, as Polanyi illustrates through the metaphor of "the second apple" (268), this effort is now understood to have failed.²¹ He therefore asks, "What can we do?" His courageous and ruthlessly honest response illuminates his distinctive contribution to contemporary intellectual life:

I believe that to make this challenge is to answer it. For it voices our self-reliance in rejecting the credentials both of medieval dogmatism and modern positivism, and it asks our own intellectual powers, *lacking any fixed external criteria*, to say on what grounds truth can be asserted in the absence of such criteria. To the question, 'Who convinces whom here?' it answers simply, 'I am trying to convince myself.' (265; emphasis added)

He adds, "we must accredit our own judgment as the paramount arbiter of all our intellectual performances" and refers to this as our "ultimate self-reliance" (265). These convictions undergird everything Polanyi asserts, including what he declares regarding the Christian prospect and, thereby, meaning and God. We must ask, however, Under the logic of "ultimate self-reliance" what sort of God is possible? Is not any conceivable deity the product of belief and affirmation—and simply an unsubstantiated illusion without it? But, if so, is not the door now wide open to the critical reductive analyses of Feuerbach and Freud? God, it would seem, is merely the comforting creation of man.

In responding to these three questions, we uncover Polanyi's deepest clarification of John 3:16-21 as well as his deep affinity with it. Let us begin with the last of them. Polanyi's surpassing contribution begins by prompting us to identify the presupposition underlying the concern. A deity and an affiliated experience of the holy that is grounded in self-reliance is

deficient only in light of the conviction (typically operating surreptitiously) that meaningful reference to God requires that He exists independent of “contamination” by the passions and interests of the knower. But to construe acknowledgement and affirmation of the personal as a denial of a reality existing independent of the knower is to overlook the very heart of Polanyi’s position. The extraordinary statements in the Preface to *Personal Knowledge* apply not only to the scientist who would know nature but also to the seeker who would know God: “I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill” (vii).²² To comprehend is to have integrated subsidiary clues into a focal whole. In achieving such integration, we are ourselves transformed, for we as a result see differently than we did before (precisely to the degree that we personally embrace that which is newly known). This acknowledgement gives rise to a series of statements that serve as the key to all that follows in the book as well as in Polanyi’s career as a whole. He states,

Such is the *personal participation* of the knower in all acts of understanding. But this does not make our understanding *subjective*. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; a contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps inconceivable) true implications. It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge. (vii-viii)

Polanyi then adds, “into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and...this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge” (viii).

The coherence of the critique of a knowledge of God achieved through belief and affirmation (“self-reliance”) requires that there be knowledge that exists without this personal dimension. But this conception of knowing rinsed clean of the personal elements defining belief is, says Polanyi, a delusion. “We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge...No intelligence...can operate outside such a fiduciary framework” (266). A central objective of *Personal Knowledge* is to show that there is a personal coefficient not only to each act of comprehension but also to any subsequent claim to know. The claim to know is of course corrigible. But instances of improvement or correction are constituted not by elimination of

every trace of the personal but rather by the effective displacement of a less certain instance of (personal) comprehension by one that is more so. Moreover, the process of affirmation and assessment, followed by reaffirmation or amendment and affirmation, is the product of the efforts of relevant inquirers taking place over time. “Reality” and “truth,” which by the very nature of the process are ever-unfolding, are the honored labels we assign to that which thereby emerges. To restrict these honorific terms to claims possessing no personal coefficient is to withdraw them from practical use altogether.

Polanyi, in short, redefines the enterprise. Personal affirmation of the existence of God is not a contaminant to be earnestly transcended. Such affirmation is instead the sine qua non for that existence (as it is, instructively, for the denial of such, or for the claim that these things are not known at all). In this sense the Christian claim to know God and to experience the holy is continuous with affirmations of knowing in any other arena of human comprehension. It is the prospect of cognition free of personal interest and commitment, not the freely acknowledged personal affirmation of God, that is suspect.

This clarification of the personal is an apt preparation for addressing the second of our issues. The deepest link between John 3:16-21 and Polanyi’s fiduciary program is the recognition that the ultimately important matter (viz., enduring meaning) depends on the individual skillfully exercising the capacity to believe. To recognize the significance of belief, however, is to acknowledge the concomitant propensity to doubt. There would be no call to believe were there not a powerful tendency not to do so. In this sense doubt is a gift, for it is only through confronting and overcoming it that the grandest treasure is forthcoming. Polanyi articulates what is implicit in John 3:16: the need to believe is never-ending because the temptation to doubt is ineradicable. What Polanyi adds is that the fruits of belief accompany victory over doubt. Granted, for Polanyi the victory is never final. But John 3:16-21, read carefully, does not promise more. Polanyi clarifies the anthropological setting for the drama that the verse beautifully and powerfully sets forth. It is scarcely perverse to concede that Christianity, through its promise of communion with a resurrected God, uniquely and without peer affords an occasion to exploit, via overcoming qua fiduciary knowing, the human propensity to withhold assent. Polanyi joins John 3:16 in acknowledging what both history and personal reflection reveal—namely, ‘twas ever thus to be human.²³

We now are in a position to address the last of our three questions. What is the fate of Polanyi's noosphere-based meaning in the face of the prospect, affirmed by cosmologists, of inevitable utter annihilation of any trace of human existence (as well as life and even the universe as a whole)? One response to this challenge is to observe that the concern for meaning can exist only so long as the creatures for which it is a problem also exist. Annihilation entails the end of sources of meaning but so too the termination of any concern about it. But this is a shallow and morally dubious evasion. Innocuously residing within Polanyi's argument that "there is only one truth" (PK, 315), we find this arresting comment: "To ask what I would believe to be the true facts of the matter, if I were somebody else, means simply to ask what somebody else would believe them to be. This kind of question is interesting...but it is clearly not a question concerning the facts of the matter" (316). Like determination of the truth or the facts of the matter, the problem of meaning exists for a living being contending with actual circumstances. It is "interesting" to reflect on the annihilation of mankind or the end of the universe. But what is pressing is the question of what to believe and how to act here and now—in the situation within which, after arriving on this orb through no action of our own, we as individuals find ourselves. Whatever might be the case in a contingent distant future, it is evident that the world exists and we find ourselves problematically situated within it. That the universe is open-ended and the future uncertain is all the more reason to exercise faith in affirming that the meaning in which we may now participate will endure. This, after all, is what John 3:16 invites us to do, thereby exercising a wisdom and offering a solace that reside in the noosphere while, remarkably, pointing beyond it.

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¹ John 3:16. This is from the King James version of the Bible. In the Moffatt translation (recommended by C. S. Lewis), the verse reads, "For God loved the world so dearly that he gave up his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life, instead of perishing."

² Emphasis added. Moffatt renders John 3:17-18 as: "God did not send his Son into the world to pass sentence on it, but to save the world by him. He who believes in him is not sentenced; he who will not believe is sentenced already, for having refused to believe in the name of the only Son of God."

³ Emphasis added. The Moffatt translation of John 3:19-21 is: "And this is the sentence of condemnation, that the Light has entered the world and yet men have preferred darkness to light. It is because their actions have been evil; for anyone whose practices are corrupt loathes the light and will not come out into it, in case his actions are exposed, whereas anyone whose life is true comes out into the light, to make it plain that his actions have been divinely prompted."

⁴ Michael Polanyi, “The Metaphysical Reach of Science” (the first of the unpublished 1964 “Duke Lectures”), 22, accessible at <http://www.polanyisociety.org/Duke/Duke1-searchable.pdf>.

⁵ Superior knowledge is “the sum total of what [an articulate culture’s] classics have uttered and its heroes and saints have done.” Polanyi adds, “If we belong to this culture then these are our great men: men to whose superiority we entrust ourselves, by trying to understand their works and to follow their teachings and examples” (PK, 376). How, then, ought we to regard an “education” that cynically debunks heroes and saints and systematically denies the existence of great men? What is the intellectual and moral status of the unfortunate souls that are the product of such schooling? There is reason to believe that Polanyi was instructed on these matters by C.S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* and is in *Personal Knowledge* responding to what he therein learned.

⁶ This is a startling change in perspective, not the least of whose life-altering implications concerns the significance of (bodily) death. In light of what the body makes possible, its death becomes both more and less important than it was prior to this understanding.

⁷ Among the things now comprehended is “a panorama of emergence” that is “an epic process” consisting of stages in which “we see arising some novel operations not specifiable in terms of the preceding level; and the whole range of them...unspecifiable in terms of their inanimate particulars” (PK, 389).

⁸ Moffatt offers the following translation: “Now faith means that we are confident of what we hope for, convinced of what we do not see.”

⁹ Moffatt: “Now when an object of hope is seen, there is no further need to hope. Who ever hopes for what he sees already?” Certainly relevant, and reassuring for one who elects the Polanyian path, is Romans 8:28: “We know also that those who love God, those who have been called in terms of his purpose, have his aid and interest in everything” (Moffatt). The prospects are glorious. See Romans 8:30.

¹⁰ Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1977), 44-45.

¹¹ Perhaps the realization comes in this form: “If Nature is all that exists—in other words, if there is no God and no life of some quite different sort somewhere outside Nature—then all stories will end in the same way: in a universe from which all life is banished without possibility of return.” This passage is from C. S. Lewis’s short but powerful 1948 essay, “On Living in an Atomic Age” (available in a collection titled *Present Concerns*, edited by Walter Hooper [San Diego: Harcourt, 1986], 73-80, at 74).

¹² Intellectual misunderstanding (e.g., materialism) impedes moral responsibility just as terminal cardiac arrest prevents the proper functioning of the intellect. For exegesis and application of Polanyi’s hierarchical philosophical anthropology, see Jon Fennell, “A Polanyian Perspective on C.S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*,” *Journal of Inklings Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (April 2014), 93-122, at 116-119.

¹³ Cf. PK, 282: “Biblical criticism and the progress of science which weakened or destroyed the extra-religious plausibility of many Biblical narratives and discredited the supposed magical powers of some Christian ritual, were bound to shake a faith implemented by the assertion of such teachings and the performance of such rituals.”

¹⁴ “The capacity for such skillful religious knowing seems universal, at least in children. Once acquired, the skill is hardly ever lost, but it rarely mastered at an advanced age without some previous training in childhood” (282). Significantly, he then adds, “Divine service can mean nothing to a person completely lacking the skill of religious knowing.”

¹⁵ “For ritual comprises a sequence of things to be said and gestures to be made which involve the whole body and alert our whole existence. Anyone sincerely saying and doing these things in a place of worship could not fail to be completely absorbed in them. He would be partaking devoutly in religious life” (198).

¹⁶ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, the penultimate paragraph.

¹⁷ The human “inescapable predicament” and what may and may not be done through Christian theology to escape it is illuminated by Polanyi in an article from 1961. After noting that to be human is to be an embodied creature possessing intellectual and moral dimensions, and thus prone to physiological as well as intellectual and moral failure, he summarizes by stating that “Such is the *necessary* condition of a morally responsible being, grafted on a bestiality *through which alone* it can exercise its own powers” (emphasis added). He then adds, “Our vision of redemption is the converse of this predicament. It is the vision of a man set free from this bondage.” This is of course the image of rebirth offered by Jesus. During Christian worship one dwells on this possibility and prays for its realization. Polanyi suggests that we here encounter man’s highest possibilities. Yet, the predicament remains “inescapable.” See “Faith and Reason” in *The Journal of Religion*, XLI (4) (October 1961), 237-247 at 247.

¹⁸ The model for this movement is “the Pauline scheme of faith, works and grace.” See, for example, “Faith and Reason,” 247. Cf. PK, 285.

¹⁹ One prays that it is not sacrilege to suggest that Polanyi emerges as a latter-day prophet as we read again, in this new light, what students of his work have surely encountered many times before: “The alternative...which I am seeking to establish...is to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs” (PK, 268).

²⁰ This appears in Chapter 8, “The Logic of Affirmation.”

²¹ See Jon Fennell, “Balance of Mind: Polanyi’s Response to the Second Apple and the Modern Predicament,” *Tradition & Discovery*, Vol. XLIV, No. 2 (July 2018), pp. 47-63.

²² The process through which we confirm these two instances of (personal) knowing varies significantly, however. See PK, 202: “It is justifiable...to speak of the verification of science by experience in a sense which would not apply to other articulate systems. The process by which other systems than science are tested and finally accepted may be called, by contrast, a process of *validation*.” Polanyi soon thereafter adds, “But both *verification* and *validation* are everywhere an acknowledgement of a commitment: they claim the presence of something real and external to the speaker.”

²³ Richard Allen, it would seem, disagrees. In *Polanyi* (London: The Claridge Press, 1990), Allen takes issue with the Polanyian analysis: “But Polanyi thinks of Christian belief only in terms of this present life. He omits entirely the hope of seeing God after this life, and thus of achieving perfection through God’s grace and in eternity” (76). Now, it is true that one in vain searches Polanyi’s work for the simple image of continued personal life after death (though we ought in this connection to recall the discussion, in a note above, of Polanyi’s “vision of redemption” from “the inescapable predicament” of our being “a morally responsible being, grafted on a bestiality through which alone it can exercise its own powers”). As we have shown, the hope of achieving eternal life is at the center of his thought. Polanyi’s primary concern, however, is to establish meaning within the confines and under the circumstances that define *this* life, and it is in *this* setting that hope exercises its vital function. (Indeed, it cannot exist elsewhere.) The eternal life to which Allen suggests Polanyi pays no mind is in fact for him (Polanyi) the central concern. But whatever meaning we come to associate with a future life can exist only in this one. On Polanyi’s view, aspiration, and the faith to which it gives rise, goes all the way down. Belonging to a groping creature in context, it enables meaning—even when such is associated with a world affirmed to exist beyond this one.