

Confronting the Minotaur: Moral Inversion and Polanyi's Moral Philosophy

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, moral inversion, ethics, ethnocentrism, skepticism, totalitarianism, tradition, Najder, nihilism, modernity

Moral inversion, the fusion of skepticism and utopianism, is a preoccupying theme in Polanyi's work from 1946 onward. In part 1, the author analyzes Polanyi's complex account of the intellectual developments that are implicated in a cascade of inversions in which the good is lost through complicated, misguided, and unrealistic dedication to the good. Parts 2 and 3 then address two of the most basic of the objections to Polanyi's theory voiced by Zdzislaw Najder. To Najder's complaint that Polanyi is not clear in his use of the term "moral," the author replies that the pivotal distinction in Polanyi's moral theory is not the moral against the intellectual, but the passions against the appetites. In considering Najder's complaint that Polanyi's argument represents a naive instance of ethnocentric absolutism, the author undertakes to show Polanyi's consistency and perspectival self-awareness by focusing on Polanyi's account of authority and dissent within a tradition, as well as on Polanyi's treatment of persuasion as a heuristic passion.

Paul Nagy has characterized Michael Polanyi as "pre-eminently a moral philosopher" (Nagy 1996, 23). This description seems consistent with certain things that Polanyi himself said about his intentions. In *Personal Knowledge*, for example, he wrote that his opposition to the "universal mechanical interpretation of things" had as its "ground" his conviction that such an interpretation "impairs man's moral consciousness" (PK 153). Moreover, the argument of *Personal Knowledge* culminates in a narrative celebration of the emergence out of an inanimate universe, not just of life, but of life forms capable of pursuing their existence in moral responsibility within the framework of meaning and value provided by the multiple traditions and convivial orders in which persons participate. The middle third of *The Study of Man*, Polanyi's "extension" of the inquiry undertaken in *Personal Knowledge*, is given over to "the study of man acting responsibly within the bounds of his human obligations" (SM 42). Polanyi's 1965 essay "On the Modern Mind" occupies itself with addressing "the challenge that a positivistic empiricism presents to the existence of moral principles" (mm 18). His purpose there is to trace the destruction of and point the way to the recovery of "the grounds for our basic [moral] ideals," ideals rooted in and constitutive of "the higher intangible levels of existence, which a positivistic empiricism refuses to recognize" (mm 13, 18). Near the end of *The Tacit Dimension*, he writes, "I have specifically promised to find a place for moral principles safe from self-destruction by a claim to boundless self-determination" (TD 85). And the opening of chapter 2 of *Meaning* complains that the "morally neutral account of all human affairs" that continues to prevail in the academy constitutes a "false philosophy" which, though it may not be able "to destroy the power of our moral convictions," nonetheless inevitably entangles us and our students in a web of reductive thinking by means of which "we must come to suspect our own moral motives" and "silence" our moral impulses (M 23).

Yet to call Polanyi "pre-eminently a moral philosopher" seems initially to stretch the bounds of credibility. Nagy rests his claim on the argument that Polanyi is "a moral philosopher in the Aristotelian tradition who anticipated the turn in recent years away from the modern ethics of rules to the classical ethics of virtue"

(Nagy 1996, abstract), and one can find strands in Polanyi's work that prefigure certain much acclaimed arguments advanced by Alasdair MacIntyre. Yet it seems hard to fault moral philosophers and theologians for being less attentive to Polanyi's contribution than epistemologists, social and political theorists, and those who work in the domain of fundamental theology have been. There are at least two impediments in the way of securing the sort of hearing for Polanyi among ethicists that would allow us to proceed to a balanced discussion of his stature as a moral philosopher. First, Polanyi is a very complicated thinker, and it is difficult to assess the value of his thought for ethics and moral philosophy without first understanding his philosophy of science, his critique of critical philosophy and positivism, his social theory, and his account of human knowing. From the point of view of the moral philosopher, this is a lot of work to do for what looks to be, at best, an uncertain gain. Second, those portions of Polanyi's writings in which he is most obviously making moral arguments tend, it seems to me, to actively discourage the required investment of time and study, because on an initial reading, they seem imprecise, mythy, tendentious, ideological, and almost (if not downright) naive.

A case in point is his analysis of what he calls "moral inversion," which may be broadly understood as the process by which the fusion of scientific skepticism ("extreme critical lucidity" [TD 4]) with utopian social aspirations ("intense moral conscience" [TD 4]) produces the dystopia of moral and political nihilism out of which arises the modern totalitarian state, in which the only principle of social order is absolute coercive power and in which material welfare is embraced as the supreme social good. The exposure and critique of moral inversion is a project to which Polanyi reverts repeatedly between 1946 and 1975,¹ and it can fairly be said that diagnosing this pathology, analyzing its causes, and devising a remedy constitute the social objective to which his philosophical work is ordered.

In 1968 Zdzislaw Najder published, in the collection *Intellect and Hope*, an adept, biting, and comprehensive critique of Polanyi's discussion of moral inversion. So far as I know, this powerful set of objections has gone unanswered. There is, of course, no way to establish how influential his essay has been in discouraging philosophical interest in the ethical dimension of Polanyi's work, but I do not doubt that Najder's reaction is emblematic of the response of many readers to this strand in Polanyi's *oeuvre*—certainly my own first effort to engage and assess Polanyi's treatment of moral inversion resulted in dismay and misgivings that closely mirrored Najder's. To the extent that Polanyi's analysis is meant to provide "a historical, social, and political theory," Najder faults it for "oversimplification, hasty judgment, and tendentious interpretation of history" (Najder 1968, 384). According to Najder, Polanyi fails to adequately differentiate Nazism and Stalinism; he romanticizes and distorts the social reality of late nineteenth-century Europe; he "neglects" "social, economic, and sociohistorical factors" (378) and "never pays attention to social and economic causes of revolutions and upheavals" (379); his "pleas for political and moral restraint and moderation sound distinctly conservative" (382) and his "conceptual framework remains thoroughly individualistic or rather, to be more precise, rests on a sort of an individualistic-intellectualistic syndrome" (383). To the extent that Polanyi's analysis is meant to present a "conceptual proposal," "a tool to analyze certain problems of morality and moral behavior, of ethical change and of mass psychology" (365), Najder faults it for lack of focus, as well as lack of clarity and consistency. If it is a proposal about psychological processes, "the meaning of the predicate 'moral' seems to be rather difficult to ascertain: what precisely differentiates moral passions from other kinds of passions?" (367). If it is a proposal about sociohistorical tendencies rather than individual psyches, then Polanyi pays inadequate attention to what Najder calls "the social determinants of morality" (369). If it is a proposal about axiological structures, Polanyi is vulnerable to "accusations of inconsistency and arbitrariness" (372) because he sometimes treats moral commitments as socially grounded professions of faith and other times presents them as "eternal truths." His position, in the end, is indistinguishable from "ethnocentric absolutism" (370).

Najder's criticisms are all weight-bearing objections and can only be answered (if they *can* be answered) by penetrating more deeply still into the logic of Polanyi's arguments. The very gravity of Najder's complaints suggests that moral inversion is an inauspicious place to begin the work of assessing Polanyi's contribution to moral philosophy. Other aspects of Polanyi's thought—his theory of fiduciary commitments, his analysis of the structure of human judgment, and his insistence that there is no escape from risk—seem considerably less problematic and clearly do have implications for ethics. Yet, on his own terms, we cannot take him seriously as a moral philosopher without giving sustained attention, sooner or later, to the metanarrative he develops concerning moral inversion in modernity. Since this account is actually considerably more complex than is usually acknowledged, I will begin by reviewing it. In sections 2 and 3, I will return to Najder's complaints (1) that Polanyi's use of "moral" and his notion of moral passions remain enigmatic (Najder 1968, 367) and (2) that Polanyi's argument offers an unwitting and regrettable example of "ethnocentric absolutism" (370). Najder's other criticisms are equally worthy of attention, but inasmuch as not all of them can be addressed here, I will concentrate on the two that seem most basic.

1. The Process of Moral Inversion

As Polanyi makes clear at the beginning of "On the Modern Mind," he believes that ideas matter, that they have the power to shape the evolution of human history. It is only because thought has "intrinsic power" that freedom of thought matters.² Ideas are contextually prompted, he grants, but ideas are not simply symptoms of and legitimations for other social forces that actually do the heavy lifting; on the contrary, ideas are a social force in their own right:

To accept the indeterminacy of knowledge requires, on the contrary [contrary to the objectivist picture of the "functioning of a mindless knower"], that we accredit a person entitled to shape his knowing according to his own judgment, unspecifiably. This notion—applied to man—implies in its turn a sociology in which the growth of thought is acknowledged as an independent force. And such a sociology is a declaration of loyalty to a society in which truth is respected and human thought is cultivated for its own sake (PK 264).

Accordingly, when people "change their minds," governments rise and fall, despotism advances or despotism collapses (mhr 32, 28). His argument concerning moral inversion is an inquiry into European intellectual history and advances a hypothesis about the way in which the development of certain ideas and the emergence of a widespread disposition to act on those ideas are implicated in the rise of totalitarian socio-political systems in the twentieth century. Indeed, it is his hypothesis that certain combinations of ideas, consistently enacted, entail totalitarian tyranny. There is no getting around the fact that Polanyi believes that ideas are an independent, determining force in political and civic life.

Polanyi also believes that ideas can be correct or incorrect in their bearing on and representation of social as well as natural realities. Incorrect ideas yield patterns of action that are, at best, unfruitful. Moreover, thought constitutes "an autonomous power" because "truth, justice, and morality have an intrinsic [if intangible] reality" (mhr 35, 36). It is not, perhaps, easy to see just what this might mean, but it seems pivotal to understanding Polanyi's conviction that totalitarian régimes, and the condition of moral inversion that supports them, are inherently unstable. Because they invert, misrepresent, and deny real forces, they are riven with contradictions and illusions that cannot be maintained over long periods of time, even when they are instantiated in comprehensive social systems that provide little purchase for doubt or questioning.

1.1 INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENTS CONTRIBUTING TO MORAL INVERSION

Polanyi's counterintuitive thesis with respect to the rise and dominion of totalitarian régimes (on the right and the left) is that the driving power behind these dehumanizing and violently oppressive governments has been essentially and fanatically moral. Whatever else the leaders of these movements may have been about, they understood themselves to be and, in fact, were (in Polanyi's judgment) implementing utopian visions of the common good. Polanyi is probing, then, a moral paradox: namely, that the twentieth century's unprecedented lake of blood had its springs, not in moral decay or complete amorality, but in pathological moralism. The demonic is not a force that opposes the moral; it is Western morality's own deepest and, in ways, most seductive temptation. Although this has presumably been a perpetual danger, in late modernity, the demonic subversion of moral intention became nothing less than inevitable when certain supporting conditions conspired to defeat critical moral self-consciousness. The puzzle that totalitarianism presents to him is, thus, the puzzle of how profound and noble moral aspirations could be so completely twisted and perverted as to result not only in the callous forms of dehumanization epitomized by the unthinkable slaughter of millions of citizens by their own various governments but in the complete subversion of justice, the wholesale sacrifice of freedom, and the systematic substitution of purposeful lies for inconvenient truths. These deaths, this subversion, this sacrifice, this substitution—these are the worldly face of moral inversion, and unlike so many others, from Karl Marx to Karl Polanyi to Zdzislaw Najder, Polanyi believes that the explanation is to be sought, not in (or not merely in) economic systems and social conflicts, but in European intellectual history. It is worth reminding ourselves, at this point, that Polanyi was a gifted Hungarian scientist and intellectual of Jewish background whose family emigrated from Hungary to escape the antisemitic laws and practices of the forces that occupied Budapest in 1919; in 1933 he left Nazi Germany under similar circumstances. Between 1928 and 1935, he made four extended trips to the Soviet Union. He may thus be said to possess a certain indisputable authority in speaking of totalitarian states. While it might be argued that he is wrong or one-sided in his interpretation, he cannot be said to be uninformed about the social conditions he seeks to diagnose.

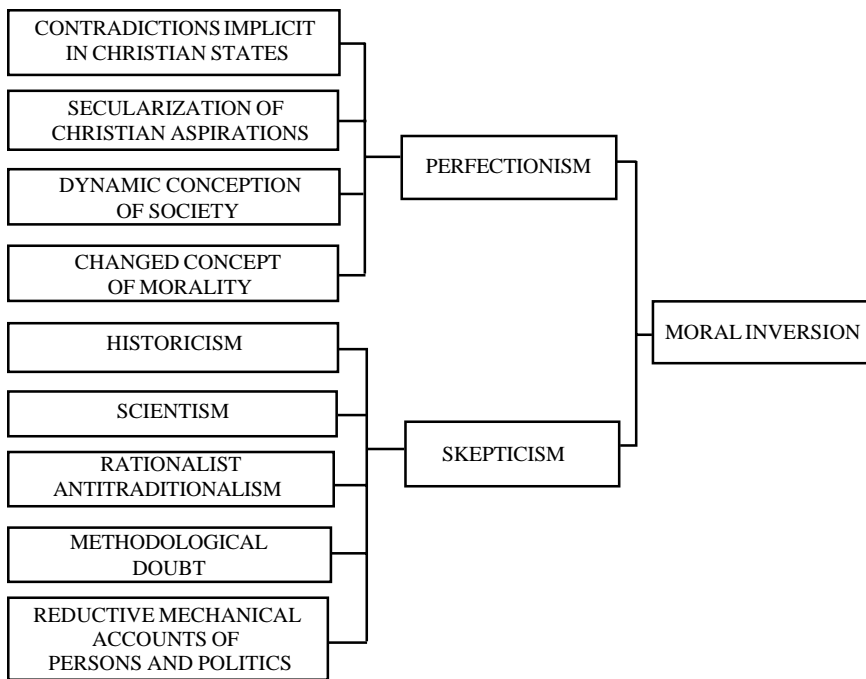
The intellectual trends that he considers relevant to the rise of totalitarianism are as numerous as their interplay is complicated. The list must include at least these developments:

- The rise of Western science was closely tied to a mechanistic conception of the natural world, which yielded a mechanistic conception of the person, and that, in turn, yielded a materialist view of politics and “a naturalistic explanation of . . . moral and social responsibilities” (tc 41).
- As the physical sciences proceeded from one triumph to another, theorists sought to apply the scientific method to studies of the social order. Wrapped, then, in the authority of science, these interpretations of political trends and these predictions of the political and economic future could represent themselves as objectively unassailable empirical accounts, effectively licensing despotism on the part of those who embraced them.
- Because appreciation of scientific truth was necessarily restricted to a highly trained élite and because material contrivance has always been so important to the physical well-being of humanity, technology, which “requires that an invention should be economic and thus achieve a material advantage” (PK 177), gained ascendancy over scientific inquiry and the cultural values that constitute the framework of science. This gave a distinct boost to an already pervasive utilitarian (means-end; manipulative) mentality: a right understanding of science was further obscured and relations of use, instrumentality, and control were celebrated.

- The relativization of truth and morals that arose with the decay of belief in revealed absolutes and rationally indubitable universals—the awareness of “our own ubiquitous participation in the shaping of truth” (PK 204)—yielded suspicion of all authorities and a species of moral nihilism (a contempt for humane ideals and an inability to respond to them) at both the political/civic and the personal levels. At the same time, it created a public eager to embrace the illusion that it would be possible to arrive at impersonal objectivity (the chief charm of which was the certainty it yielded) by working within the rigid constraints of the empirically provable.
- The scientific/rational challenge to traditional forms of social order and authority resulted in secularism (distrust of the clergy) and the shift from a static conception of society to a dynamic one. The idea that society is progressing toward ever higher and more adequate forms gained wide acceptance, and “the deliberate contriving of unlimited social improvement” was elevated to the status of “a dominant principle” (bn 8).
- With the decay of immemorial customs and unquestionable authority, the internal contradictions between the practice and the rhetoric of any society “professing Christian precepts” became a source of social disruption (bn 5).
- Whereas morality had once been construed as the restraint of passion and the achievement of serenity in the face of fate, it began to be understood in terms of the pursuit of (the enabling or enactment of) the social good; this produced “inordinate aspirations” and opened the way for “moral excess” (bn 3).
- As otherworldly faith gave way to this-worldly enthusiasms, a secularized chiliastic perfectionism was loosed in the civic realm, fanning impatience with the (necessary) compromises of all existing social orders and yielding a ruthless revolutionary political righteousness. With this came the conviction that the end sought will justify whatever means are used to achieve it (see especially the description of the moral zealotry of Russian revolutionaries, mhr 38).
- Romanticism (“a comprehensive movement of thought and feeling” evoked by “[m]an’s consciousness of himself as a sovereign individual” [bn 8]) gave rise to the idea that “man’s moral responsibility would be safely grounded in nature” (tc 43). This led Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others, to distrust society (authority, culture, and tradition) as a form of corruption and to place great value on individuality and spontaneity. It also led, in parallel contrast, to the utilitarian view (particularly in the theories of Claude-Adrien Helvétius and Jeremy Bentham) that “reduced man to a bundle of appetites feeding themselves according to a mathematical formula” (tc 43).
- The rise of absolute individualism had the paradoxical result of authorizing the absolute state: “an outstanding individual is a law unto himself and may, as a statesman, unscrupulously impose his will on the rest of the world” (PK 232). A nation, too, has “the right and the duty to fulfil its ‘historic destiny’ irrespective of moral obligations” (PK 232; see also SFS 78–79, bn 7ff., M 12).
- Whereas freedom and obligation had been seen as inseparable (because freedom was considered to be a function of membership in a community, membership which entailed an obligation to a particular tradition and its values [SFS 65, 74]), freedom began to be conceived as sovereign individuality and as a release from social obligation. Revolt, disorder, and meaningless activity came to be seen as the road to freedom (M 23).
- Growing social disillusionment and contempt provoked self-conscious immoralism. People with developed moral sensitivities thus pursued and flaunted vicious behavior “in protest against the moral shallowness of society” (bn 9). Individuals embraced and were guided in their conduct by the view that “evil may be morally superior to good” (bn 13) because it was honest, natural, authentic, and untrammled by discredited social conventions

A listing of this sort makes it clear that moral inversion is not being presented to us as a simple, obvious, and straightforward development. Indeed, my own initial impression that Polanyi’s theory of moral inversion is too speculative or too sketchy to be very convincing seems, in light of such a list, to have arisen because of the breadth of data that he undertakes to integrate rather than because his analysis is superficial or simplistic. There is, after all, a considerable literature on nearly all of these trends. And if Polanyi has not given us the sort of detailed and specific analysis of intellectual history that we might have found more persuasive, it may be because he could hardly track them all with the same level of intensity with which he has traced the development and effects of positivistic skepticism.

It is, moreover, his argument that none of these trends, taken by itself, would produce moral inversion. What is required is the *fusion* of two or more. In analyzing what fuses with what to produce moral inversion, Polanyi gives different accounts in different places, but in all of these accounts, we find him combining one of the trends connected with the development of scientific rationalism into positivistic skepticism with one of the trends relating to shifts in and intensifications of civic moral aspiration. Moral inversion requires, to use the words of Harry Prosch, “the twin devils of the ideal of knowledge as detached objectivity and the ideal of action as moral perfectionism” (Prosch 1986, 272).



Different permutations of elements from the two basic clusters yield the various summary characterizations of the origins of moral inversion that Polanyi advances in different places. In *Personal Knowledge*, he speaks of the dynamo-objective coupling, by which he means that in any given psyche, the dynamic or motive power of the moral sentiments is fused with the illusion of scientific certainty provided by false theories of impersonal, objective knowledge (PK 230). Or in a slightly different way, the energizing power of moral indignation fuses with a materialistic and utilitarian “interpretation of morality [which] accuses all moral sentiments of hypocrisy” (PK 233). And in the arena of public affairs, “high moral dynamism” fuses with “our stern critical passion which demands that we see human affairs objectively, i.e. as a mechanistic process in the Laplacean manner,” or, to put it yet another way, “inordinate . . . moral aspirations” fuse with a “completely amoral . . . objectivist outlook” (PK 228). In *The Tacit Dimension*, he at one point suggests that “Scientific skepticism and utopianism had thus fused into a new skeptical fanaticism” (TD 4) and, at another, describes the effects of “self-doubt coupled with perfectionism” (TD 87). These passages, and others like them, support the view that moral inversion occurs only in the interplay of a double infirmity: a pathologically “misguided” intellectual passion—“a passion for achieving absolutely impersonal knowledge” (PK 142)—enters into a symbiotic relationship with a pathological (or at least invidiously “inordinate”) moral passion—the utopian passion for social perfection. There are, however, other passages that look for an explanation, not to some set of pathologies within the normal framework of Western thought, but in the framework itself. In works at the beginning and at the end of his philosophical career, he suggests that the contradiction or antinomy has been built into the Western tradition of thought from its very inception in the imperfect cultural welding of the rational and critical heritage of the Greeks with the moral and prophetic heritage of the Christians. “Modern thought is a mixture of Christian beliefs and Greek doubts. Christian beliefs and Greek doubts are logically incompatible and the conflict between the two has kept Western thought alive and creative beyond precedent. But this mixture is an unstable foundation. Modern totalitarianism is a consummation of the conflict between religion and skepticism” (LL 109–10; reprinted nearly word-for-word in M 20–21). It is as if he supposes that the intractable presence of each exposes the other to novel forms of corruption.

While it is difficult to bring all of the pertinent elements into a lucid comprehensive statement of the interactions of all these intellectual developments in triggering moral inversion(s), I do not see obvious contradictions among the various partial accounts. That the accounts of the origins of moral inversion(s) should be variable in this particular way actually contributes to the force that the notion develops when it is closely studied. The experience is rather like questioning a witness on multiple occasions. The account that the witness gives changes as the questioning probes the event from different angles, but so long as the witness does not give contradictory accounts, the witness’s ability to place the same story in multiple contexts enhances the impression of reliability, whereas a rigid account that could only get at the event by approaching it in one way would give the impression of being an invented story rather than the fruit of many-dimensional experience. Moreover, if Polanyi is at all correct in his analysis, it must be granted that he is trying to track exceptionally complex cultural developments which are interrelated, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing in countless ways.

1.2 SPURIOUS MORAL INVERSION

Words and beliefs matter because people act on them, but Polanyi acknowledges that it is not uncommon for there to be some discrepancy between theory and practice. Moreover, important as ideas are, practices and institutions have their own resistant durability. “[P]eople can carry on a great tradition even while professing a philosophy which denies its premisses. For the adherents of a great tradition are largely unaware

of their own premisses, which lie deeply embedded in the unconscious foundations of practice” (SFS 76). A scientist can voice a completely wrong theory of science while still managing to function as a fine and productive scientist; likewise, an agent can imbibe and repeat completely false theories of the moral life without ceasing to do the right thing in situations of concrete moral choice. Taught by the disenchanting to be embarrassed by the traditional language of morals, we learn to use other language for what we are doing ethically and politically, giving a false materialistic account of human action and denying that agents have any motive other than material self-aggrandizement, or pleasure, or power. But even in doing so, we might still fail to draw the logical existential consequences of these theoretical accounts, or we might be protected from drawing such conclusions by the existence of institutions incompatible with such conclusions. Such situations constitute spurious moral inversions. He believes that a rich capacity for this kind of inconsistency or “suspended logic” is what has kept the Anglo-American world safe, so far, from the menace of totalitarianism.

Because spurious moral inversion involves a contradiction, it represents a dangerously unstable situation. Thoroughgoing moral inversion is logically more stable because it brings personal conduct and social arrangements into line with the accounts that are given of them.³ The importation of the corrupted accounts into politics which do not already have the protective institutions and practices in place will inevitably produce complete moral inversion because the community legislates according to the theories it has embraced as true. Moreover, inasmuch as words and ideas are considered by Polanyi to be powerful social forces, untrue descriptions of what we are doing are profoundly subversive even in established, stable institutional contexts. In such settings, the impetus toward greater consistency (the passage from spurious moral inversion to actual moral inversion) comes, ironically, with “a great upsurge of moral demands on social life” (PK 234). In periods of social crisis and social agitation, social contradictions are brought into view and exploited. More important, when traditional moral arrangements and behaviors, *particularly moral restraints on behaviors*, are challenged, their defenders find themselves without any theoretical support, since the regnant accounts explain personal behavior and social arrangements in terms of power and interest. When new social programs are ardently advocated and extreme social change is proposed, existing practices are without defense and are dismissed in contempt. “When injected into a utilitarian framework it [social dynamism] transmutes both itself and this framework. It turns into the fanatical force of a machinery of violence. This is how moral inversion is completed: man masked as a beast turns into a Minotaur” (PK 235; see also 268).

1.3 THE MAKING OF THE MINOTAUR

Yet two questions suggest themselves: Why should the fusion produce a devouring monster, rather than, say, a bungling and inefficient bureaucracy? And if positivistic skepticism functions so efficiently to evacuate the political realm of all moral scruples and content, why not say simply that the rise of totalitarian savagery is, as people intuitively believe, an index of the abandonment of morality, rather than insisting on the paradox of morality running amuck? In considering these questions, we need to examine in more careful detail at least one of his accounts of the process of inversion. Since *Personal Knowledge* offers the most comprehensively developed statement of Polanyi’s philosophy, it makes sense to examine the version that we find there, and I want to look less at the actual passages that invoke the term “moral inversion” (the last six sections of chapter 7, “Conviviality”) than at three earlier arguments that put in place the groundwork upon which the summary discussion of moral inversion relies. All three preliminary considerations explore the roots of “[t]he moral appeal of a declared contempt for moral scruples” (PK 235).

1.3.1 *The Laplacean ideal of knowledge*

Toward the end of the subsection “Scientific Value,” in chapter 6, “Intellectual Passions,” Polanyi discusses at some length the “Laplacean delusion” or “fallacy” (141). This “fallacy” has multiple dimensions, but for our purposes can be summarized as “a conception of science pursuing the ideal of absolute detachment by representing the world in terms of its exactly determined particulars” (139), together with the conviction that an adequate knowledge of these entities and the natural (that is, physical) forces that “animate” them would yield “a complete scientific knowledge of the universe” (140). Laplace, by “substituting” the illusion of “a knowledge of all experience” for what was, in fact, nothing but “a knowledge of all atomic data,” set in motion the chain of (self-)deceptions that produced “a mechanistic world view” (141). This conceptual development, grounded in a profound error of oversimplification, constituted a “menace” not only to science itself but also to “cultural values.” Captivated by the “Laplacean ideal of knowledge,” subsequent thinkers derived from it a widely accepted “conception of man” which was used to guide “the conduct of human affairs” (141). A mechanistic conception of the world thus yielded a mechanistic conception of the person which in turn yielded a materialistic view of politics. This persisting materialistic view of politics has two dimensions. In the first place it produces a cynical and distrustful view of the nature of politics and governance: “Its reductive programme, applied to politics, entails the idea that political action is necessarily shaped by force, motivated by greed and fear, with morality used as a screen to delude the victims” (141). In the second place, it alters the conception of the highest public good, teaching that “material welfare and the establishment of an unlimited power for imposing the conditions of material welfare are the supreme good” (142).

As material welfare is elevated, other goods, such as scientific values and various forms of liberty, are subordinated, devalued, and even suppressed. Thus we arrive at the paradox that a line of interpretation arising from the operation of intellectual passion, specifically, the “passion for achieving absolutely impersonal knowledge” (142), has the consequence of discrediting the intellectual passions and the articulate systems which they express and reinforce. This destruction of intellectual passion by intellectual passion is possible only because the intellectual passion that drives the process is a “misguided” one, a passion hell-bent on achieving a fallacious objective. That it is misguided is shown by the fact that it destroys its very base, and this leads Polanyi to articulate “a criterion of consistency” for assessing theories of human nature and human society: “our conceptions of man and human society must be such as to account for man’s faculty in forming these conceptions and to authorize the cultivation of this faculty within society” (142).

This passage is important to a consideration of moral inversion because it introduces the separation of passions from the objectives they seek to achieve. It also is one of the simpler and cleaner accounts of the social degeneration Polanyi is exercised to reverse. But one of the most interesting things about this passage is that he introduces “moral aspirations” into this developmental portrait even though they do not seem at all necessary to the portrait of, and critique of, reductive materialism that I have just summarized. Into the paragraph describing the reconceptualization of the highest public good, he interjects, “But our age overflows with inordinate moral aspirations. By absorbing this zeal the objectives of power and wealth acquire a moral sanctity which, added to their supposed scientific necessity, enforces their acceptance as man’s supreme and total destiny” (142).

This observation prefigures, of course, the fusion that is characteristic of the process of moral inversion, but its apparent gratuitousness in this particular passage invites a deeper probing of his thought. Clearly he believes that the moral legitimization of increasingly reductive accounts of human activity, the aura of “moral

sanctity,” is not adventitious; neither does it tag along after changes driven by other forces. I began section 1 by drawing attention to Polanyi's conviction that ideas directly influence the course of history, but obviously they can influence history only when they are acted upon. The motives that impel action and sustain citizens through the dislocations of social rearrangements are not intrinsic to the ideas themselves; otherwise, spurious moral inversion would not be possible. Thus, when we set the passage in question in the context of other components of his argument, we can begin to see at least three plausible reasons for his introduction of a reference to moral aspirations into his cognitive account of the extension of reductive materialism into political philosophy.

1. A cognitive adjustment that can be tracked explicitly has a tacit dimension that can only be described obliquely. Elsewhere in the book he notes that the success of communication, despite all its specific stumbles and fumbles, arises out of “[t]he interpersonal coincidence of tacit judgments,” a coincidence that is “primordially continuous with the mute interaction of powerful emotions” (PK 205). If this is true of communication, how much more true must it be of our capacity for joint action. Our cognitive life as personal knowers has subterranean springs in emotion, and the mystery of agency lies hidden in the vibrant turmoil of volition, desire, need, interestedness, and love that impels us into motion. It is one of the faults of the descendants of LaPlace that they refuse to credit any such bodily grounding of inquiry, let alone knowledge, and Polanyi's work suggests that it is one of the ironies of history that the triumph of the LaPlacean vision of the polis was powered by its infusion with passions and aspirations that it denied.

2. The reordering of social goods generated by Laplacean universal mechanics was not, in Polanyi's view, anything like the neutral cognitive “reevaluation” that Najder conceives it to have been. It was a reconceptualization freighted with authority and commanding extraordinary sacrifices. It was, in his judgment, the paradoxical combination of alleged scientific inevitability and “moral sanctity” that authorized its ministers to exercise the full force of their power in antidemocratic, violent, and totalitarian strategies for realizing an impoverished social order, which was, in perfect good conscience, represented by zealots as a “destiny.” Only this could explain why in totalitarian states, the exercise of coercive power is often supplemented by patently moral denunciations of any deviation in thought or action as “irresponsible, selfish, immoral” (PK 180).

3. Parallel to the irony of intellectual passions that destroy their own foundations, is the irony of moral aspirations that motivate action that yields not a better, more just social order, but a worse, less just one. On the LaPlacean reading of the human situation, political action is supposed to be “shaped by force, motivated by greed and fear” (PK 141), completely shorn of any authentic moral inspiration, yet examined honestly, it seems, in fact, to have been driven, as a political program, by a conception of the good and a profound sense of social responsibility.

Reverting later in the same chapter to this “materialistic outlook paradoxically imbued by inordinate moral aspirations,” he suggests that by this means “the materialistic interpretation of culture [became] a disguised imperative” (PK 180). This exposes for us the important fact that moral inversions are actually of (at least) two kinds. In addition to the open “moral appeal of immorality” (PK 232), which is most pronounced in the various explicitly nihilistic philosophies (particularly German Romantic nihilism), there are also covert

situations in which moral discourse and moral concern appear to disappear altogether from the public arena, having been driven, so to speak, underground. Morality, ashamed of itself and publically denied, continues to function, adopting the coloration of scientific statement or some other disguise. This picture is later reaffirmed where he writes, “For when open professions of the great moral passions animating a free society are discredited as specious or utopian, its dynamism will tend to be transformed into the hidden driving force of a political machine, which is then proclaimed as inherently right and granted absolute dominion over thought” (PK 214).

Hidden moral passions are the breeding ground of fanaticism. As he says in “Beyond Nihilism,” moral passions that are torn from their proper objects or forced into disguised expression cannot “speak in their own voice and are no longer accessible to moral arguments” (bn 17–18). Were it only a matter of deception, of moral motive having to express itself in an alien idiom, the situation “would perhaps be merely pitiful” (PK 231). But the transposition changes the passion in question. It becomes “an isolated passion, inaccessible to moral considerations” (PK 231). In other words, the energy and commitment become immune to public criticism, to self-conscious review, and, perhaps most importantly, to any form of restraint. “[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).

1.3.2 *Self-set standards and moral doubt*

At the beginning of chapter 7, “Conviviality,” Polanyi sets the “civic predicament” (PK 204) in a different frame. Here he begins by reflecting on the anxiety produced in the individual knower when she absorbs the fact that her convictions, which she holds to be true and upon which she acts, sometimes irreversibly, have been acquired in a particular social location at a particular time from particular fallible peers, teachers, and authorities. This anxiety is partly a function of the historicists’ dismantling of revealed and rational “truth,” but it is important to see that the anxiety is also, to some large degree, the result of the unreasonable standards for judging knowledge that have been invented by critical philosophy. In any case, suffering from “the internal insecurity of self-set standards” (211), she is vulnerable to a double danger: on the one hand, her convictions suddenly appear to be mindless conventions that have been foisted upon her by others for their own purpose and convenience. On the other hand, to the extent that she can still feel that her commitments are her own at all, her convictions are bound to seem subjective, arbitrary, and capricious (203).

This personal disquiet, pressing toward relativism and provoking self-distrust, is socially magnified into a wholesale suspicion of authority:

At all points where men in authority are seen to impose on others intellectual values which on reflection may come to appear adventitious, the justification of this authority may be called in question. The exercise of authority will tend to appear as bigoted or as hypocritical, if it asserts as universal what is actually parochial.

Thus the disturbance of our own convictions, caused by the sight of our own ubiquitous participation in the shaping of truth, will expand into a civic predicament (203–4).

This gives us, again, a picture of social distrust, public cynicism, and political decay, but the account is different. As we have seen, in chapter 6 Polanyi argues that a reductive view of the human person and a materialist account of social activity produces a cynical and distrustful view of the nature of politics and governance: “Its reductive programme, applied to politics, entails the idea that political action is necessarily

shaped by force, motivated by greed and fear, with morality used as a screen to delude the victims” (141). But here, at the beginning of chapter 7, the cynical and distrustful view of the nature of politics and governance is shown to arise out of the conundrum produced not by what Polanyi judges to be a wrong understanding of knowledge but by what he considers to be basically a right understanding of knowledge. If we run down the road prepared by a deluded conception of perfectly objective, empirically bound knowledge, we arrive at a view of politics as amoral—a rough and unrestrained conflict of power, aimed at survival and dominance. If we run down the road prepared for us by the sociology of knowledge, we also seem to arrive at a view of politics as an amoral realm where the clever and powerful manipulate social arrangements for their own advantage and where the weak and victimized have no protection and no court of appeal.

1.3.3 *The inevitability of imperfection*

In “Two Kinds of Culture,” a subsequent subsection of chapter 7, Polanyi offers a third account of the origins of suspicion of politics and governing authorities, and this account is the most fundamental. Here he is writing, not about pathologies that might be cured, but about the human condition itself, as he understands it. Thought and action in the civic realm, even when pursued freely, must necessarily be pursued on a platform of three civic institutions: “group loyalty, property and power” (215). These are the civic institutions that establish social cohesion, ensure the wherewithal for individuals to sustain their lives, and defend the community and its property against various external and internal threats. These institutions, however essential to the existence of a functional society, are not particularly appealing morally: “loyalty is parochial, property appetitive and public authority violent” (215). In other words, the “civic pole” of culture is “essentially at variance with the universal intent of intellectual or moral standards” (215). So moral aspirations will always overleap civic realities, and the more ambitious and unequivocal these aspirations are, the more dissatisfied their proponents will be with social reality. “[I]n a critical age, this intertwining of civic exigencies with the ideals of morality will remain precarious” (215–16).

This social realism is all of a piece with his remarks elsewhere (usually in the context of explicit considerations of moral inversion) concerning the revolution-breeding aversion of the morally righteous to the apparent hypocrisy of régimes that espouse values that they do not practice. But it works in the other direction, too, and it is this other direction that Polanyi underlines in the discussion in “Two Kinds of Culture.” The discrepancy between moral ideals and social requirements can make moral criticism seem alternately unreasonably utopian and cynically self-serving. “The genuineness of moral standards will be rendered suspect when it is realized that they are upheld by force, based on property and imbued with local loyalty. . . . Morality will then be [perceived to be] reduced to a mere ideology” (216).⁴

Social life, even under the best of circumstances, will always present us with an impure mix of moral ideals and amoral exigencies. Thus, Polanyi speaks of “the eternally menacing discrepancy between the universalist claims of morality and its actual dependence on power and profit” (231). And at the end of the chapter “Conviviality,” he calls this the inherently unstable logic that is built into a free society. The reason that social reality cannot be otherwise is succinctly specified toward the end of *The Tacit Dimension* where he probes “the logic by which successive levels of reality are related to each other” (TD 85). Every level of reality leaves open possibilities, “boundary conditions,” that are closed by operational principles at the next level, but what is possible at the higher levels is limited by the lower ones: “All our higher principles must rely for their working on a lower level of reality and this necessarily sets limits to their scope” (TD 85). At one level of reality, we find society “as an organization of power and profit” (TD 86). As such, it leaves many decisions and arrangements

open to determination by higher (that is, less materially determined) moral principles like justice and beneficence, but it remains what it is: a material system for securing material well-being. Accordingly, “moral progress can be achieved only within the medium of a society operating by the exercise of power and aiming at material advantages” (TD 86). This makes it clear why “inordinate endeavors” (TD 85) are misconceived and bound to fail. At the same time, it is equally misguided to resolve the tension by declaring moral aspirations to be fanciful delusions. Though the lower levels of reality set limits to the scope of moral aspiration, it does not follow that our aspirations are reducible to the forces that limit them. We fail equally by refusing to recognize limits or by denying the operation of “transcendent values.” And, curiously, both failures produce the same result: a political space evacuated of operational moral purposes and restraints.

In the final paragraph of *The Tacit Dimension*, he observes that “[m]en need a purpose which bears on eternity.” This follows, he believes, from the evolutionary “cosmic emergence of meaning” that he has traced—human beings, unlike lower animals, cannot be “satisfied with a brief existence” (TD 92). He offers “truth” and “our ideals” as the objects that can satisfy this hunger and concludes “this might be enough, if we could ever be satisfied with our manifest moral shortcomings and with a society which has such shortcomings fatally involved in its workings” (TD 92). It is the failure to adjust to this reality that has been half of the fatal fusion producing totalitarian horrors.

1.3.4 *The Minotaur at the center of the maze*

These three accounts converge in portraying the development of a conception of the public realm from which moral ideals, moral motives, and moral restraints have been banished. Even though this conception does not accurately represent civic reality (in which moral motives and interests continue to operate, but have adopted displaced forms of expression), public life has been distorted and impaired by being so conceived. The most significant inversion is the subordination of thought to power, an inversion that becomes increasingly lethal as a polity approaches “the complete subordination of all thought to the service of one specific centre of power” (PK 243). When this inversion is coupled with the unleashing of fanaticism and the absence of any recognition of limits and moral restraints, the Minotaur is born: a wily and dangerous monster with a bull’s head on a man’s body, that devours human beings.

Moral inversion is not one thing, but a cascade of paradoxical inversions that break upon us. Taken together, they have the potential to bring to an end the culture and civilization that arose out of the Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe. In the name of social well-being, society is immeasurably impoverished. In the name of social justice, justice is trampled upon. In the name of self-determination, self-determination is denied. In the name of freedom, freedom is lost. In the name of morality, immorality is celebrated. In the name of truth, the possibility of arriving at truth is denied. In the name of the highest moral aspirations, the West descends into “soul-destroying tyrannies” (PK 265). Liberalism is devoured by her own children, and the Enlightenment is by the Enlightenment destroyed.

Yet this destructive movement, this process of cultural deformation, does not appear to Polanyi to be inevitable or irreversible. It has not resulted because liberalism is some “deception of vain desires.” It has come about in the first place through wrong ideas that can, with effort, be set right. But, more fundamentally, the process is rooted in the pathos of deluded hope. Persons aspire to more than the human condition can supply. At the root of moral inversion is a denial of human reality, a basic blindness or self-deception or antirealism that renders our aspirations demonic. It happens when we seek the certainty guaranteed by absolute impersonal

knowledge, refusing to recognize our personal participation in all our acts of knowing. It happens when we aspire to a political world free of the operations of interest, power, and possession. And it happens when we reject our flawed and contradictory social traditions in the ardor of self-determination.⁵

2. The Meaning of “Moral”

Having familiarized ourselves with the complexity of Polanyi’s consideration of moral inversion, we can now return to Najder’s criticisms. He notes that it is not clear whether the frame of reference for moral inversion is psychological, sociological, or axiological—or all three at once. Looked at as a contribution to moral psychology, Polanyi’s proposal advances at least two claims—the claim that “moral forces [are] primary motives of man” (PK 234) and the claim that moral passions are separable from moral ideals—that raise questions about how he is using the term “moral”:

Polanyi assumes also that moral *passions* are inherent in all men—while moral *ideals* are not: this separability of the sphere of passions from the sphere of ideals forms, in fact, the core of “moral inversion.” According to Polanyi, men can preserve and exercise their moral passions while shedding moral ideas for the sake of “immorality.” Seen in this light, the meaning of the predicate “moral” seems to be rather difficult to ascertain: what precisely differentiates moral passions from other kinds of passions? (Najder 1968, 367).

If the concept of moral inversion is looked at, instead, as a contribution to sociological analysis, his use of “moral” becomes problematic from another point of view. To analyze temporal changes or cultural contrasts in ethical conduct or moral beliefs, sociology requires “a neutral concept of ‘the moral’” (Najder 1968, 369). The sociological usage of “moral” needs to be neutral in the sense of designating a particular domain of interpersonal behavior in which praise and blame of a certain sort are appropriately apportioned, but, Najder complains, Polanyi’s use of “moral” seems always to mean “morally commendable.” Sociological and historical studies of ethical change also require a conception of “moral” that is neutral in a second way. The concept of the moral that is being used to understand moral change should not be a concept of the moral that is characteristic of only one of the stages in the process of change that is being studied. Hence, a more careful sociologist would treat the changes Polanyi studies as “‘moral revaluation’—a shift from one system to another” (Najder 1968, 373), rather than treating them as a challenge or “crisis” or “inversion.” Najder faults Polanyi’s use of “moral” on the grounds that it is always evaluative and never simply descriptive.

Najder has put his finger on several fundamental features of Polanyi’s approach. There is a sense in which Polanyi, in concert with his sustained attack on the fact/value dichotomy, has dissolved the notion of a distinctively “moral” realm of human activity. Polanyi is also, again by reason of the reorientation characteristic of his entire philosophical program, deeply skeptical of the proposal that anyone can generate a neutral sense of “moral.” In the remainder of this section, I will examine his notion of moral passions, trying to clarify what he does and does not mean by the predicate “moral” when he is writing about moral passions and moral inversion. In section 3, I will return to the question of moral neutrality in the evaluation of beliefs, teachings, and conduct relating to social well being.

2.1 AGENCY, APPETITES, AND PASSIONS

Polanyi places “passions” among the “pervasive conditions” that “pervade the whole person” (PK 300). Some of these pervasive conditions are purely passive, that is, they do not involve commitment/affirmation, but some are “actively entered upon” (PK 312), in a deployment of commitment and affirmation. Bodily feelings such as pain, tiredness, or boredom are both pervasively bodily and mental, but they involve no action, commitment, or affirmation. These are pervasive states that we simply “endure.” In such experiences, “the personal in us” is not engaged; the condition is a purely subjective one. Pervasive feelings of pleasure can be equally passive, though they are enjoyed rather than suffered. Appetites constitute a motive toward action; the satisfaction of the appetites therefore “entail[s] a manner of commitment” (300). The moment we seek to achieve something by action, we “[submit] to requirements” that we acknowledge to be “independent” of ourselves (300). But the appetites are the lowest and least personal of those pervasive conditions that, being “actively entered upon,” involve affirmation or commitment. Passions belong to a level above the appetites, but passions and appetites do have many common characteristics. Both are forms of centered striving that rest on “innate sentience and alertness,” “purpose and attention” (PK 96). Both are pre-articulate cravings that impel a creature into action, being “self-moving and self-satisfying impulses” (PK 96). Both share “the same pointed character” (PK 172), that is, both are intentional or directed forms of striving. Both invoke self-set standards since it is the satisfaction of the agent herself which marks the end of striving.

A mental passion is, as it were, a vector extending from a proximate root in my bodily being to an objective that I seek. At its proximate root, it is a communally engendered emotion or a motive—that is, it is a directed longing or desire, a power of acting toward achievement, an impelling of my person toward an anticipated but as yet unreal state of affairs. As such, mental passions, like appetites, belong to the tacit dimension of my being; no fully explicit account of them can be rendered. When we speak of persons, this unsayable motive power, this agency, is part of what we are speaking about.

But if there is a continuum to be traced between appetites and the “higher intellectual cravings” (PK 96), there are also disjunctive differences. Intentionally and actively in movement toward its objective, a mental passion encompasses a goal or ideal, which is a self-set or personally affirmed standard of excellence received from the practice of an established community. Moral and intellectual passions alike can be misbegotten or misdirected. It is possible for them to be misbegotten or misdirected precisely because they are not appetites.

The following table of differences is derived primarily from Polanyi’s comparison of the appetites and the intellectual passions in *Personal Knowledge*. So far as I can see, the moral passions differ from the appetites in the same ways, a fact which Polanyi seems to acknowledge in *The Study of Man*, where he uses the more comprehensive term “mental passions” in differentiating our strictly personal powers from the appetitive drives that are also present in animals. The passionate and the personal are very closely linked (PK 77–78), and the table suggests why that is so.

APPETITES	MENTAL PASSIONS
Bodily emotions	“Mental interests” (PK 174); “the essential restlessness of the human mind” (PK 196)
Self-centered drives	Responsible commitment (SM 67); “Heuristic cravings” (PK 129); “heuristic endeavors” (PK 389)
Lower, or more basic, interests	Transpersonal higher purposes
Self-satisfaction; self-fulfillment	Self-modification; self-transcendence
Body as an instrument of self-indulgence (PK 395)	Body as a condition of the person’s calling (PK 395)
Predominately innate; we are equipped with perception, “motoricity,” and appetites by nature	Acquired by education
Shared with animals	Not shared with animals
Private	Public: “they delight in cherishing something external to us, for its own sake” (PK 174)
Objects sought are instrumentally good	Objects sought are intrinsically good
Subjective in the sense of being “guided by standards of private satisfaction” (PK 174)	Oriented toward “fulfilling universal obligations” (because satisfaction requires upholding the larger articulate framework from which the standards of excellence are derived) (PK 174)
Self-centered individuality” (PK 395, SM 77)	“Responsible personhood of thoughtful man” (PK 395)
Requiring no framework of articulation and being far older than such frameworks; “mute exploration” leading to “mute satisfaction” (PK 99)	“attached to an articulate framework” (PK 173)
Do not imply any “affirmation . . . about anything outside himself” (PK 172)	Do imply an affirmation of something outside the inquirer
Satisfaction “terminates the situation which evoked them [the activities]” (PK 173).	“Intellectual passions perpetuate themselves by their fulfillment” (PK 173), at least partly because mind continually calls into question previously achieved satisfactions (PK 196)
Satisfaction consumes or “monopolizes” the objects which gratify it, thus creating a scarcity of objects offering gratification.	Satisfaction of the passion “enrich[es] the mind of all” by enhancing the availability of what satisfies; “the gratification of mental passions creates objects destined to gratify the same passions in others” (SM 60).
What satisfies the drive is a source of gratification only	What satisfies the passion is both a source of (personal) gratification and “a voice which commands respect”; thus, yielding to these passions is an effort “to become more satisfying to ourselves” and is an acceptance of obligation (PK 174).
The appetite is aimed at the satisfaction of the agent only.	The agent seeks an achievement that will be “satisfying and compelling both for himself and everybody else” (PK 301).
Control, contrivance, and manipulation	Trust, surrender, dedication, and service

There are several things to be noticed here. The passions arise as a function of the human development of symbol systems enabling speech and writing. Whereas the appetites are grounded in our existence as biological animals and seek nothing but their own surcease in bodily satisfaction (whether the satisfaction of release or the satisfaction of fulfillment), the passions belong to a higher emergent level and are distinctively human and personal. The passions have to do with a layer of reality that is essentially a social construction, a layer of reality which comes into being only insofar as our complex symbol systems enable us to enact into being institutions and practices—an entire convivial order—that, while being contingent upon materiality, cannot be reduced to material conditions. “The articulate life of man’s mind is his specific contribution to the universe; by the invention of symbolic forms man has given birth and lasting existence to thought” (PK 264–65). The transgenerational character of these systems of thought explains how it is that we can say both that we are their authors and that they “have power to control our own thought” (PK 265). They are, moreover, malleable systems, and we stand in a critical relation to them in two senses: First, we are not passively shaped by them but actively accredit their authority. “They speak to us and convince us, and it is precisely in their power over our own minds that we recognize their justification and their claim to universal acceptance” (PK 265). Second, by our own appropriation of and original thought within these systems, we alter what we then convey to the rising generations.

A second thing to notice is that while the appetites are what we might properly call subjective (in their arising, their manifestations, and their satisfaction), intellectual and moral passions, being a function of a shared tradition or articulate framework, are not. Mental cravings are learned cravings. To pursue the satisfaction of such cravings is to endorse the social reality of which their objects form an integral part. What will satisfy the cravings is also learned from others, and what satisfies the craving is not an internal state in the agent, but a “public” achievement that further strengthens the practices, tradition, and interpersonal web which awakened the craving in the first place. The standards of achievement are self-set in two senses. Insofar as this layer of reality is a human construction, the standards of excellence intrinsic to it are in some deep sense a human creation, having no grounding in the cosmos apart from being the achievement of human consciousness which is itself an achievement of the cosmos. The particular agent internalizes these standards by dwelling in the framework provided by the articulate system and by being guided by the preceding generation(s) of practitioners. Yet the process of internalization is not some sort of passive imprinting or mechanical conditioning; rather, it is an active affirmation and commitment by which the agent accepts and endorses what is given as worthy of reverence and commitment. As a result, what the individual seeks as personally satisfying will also be what reinforces and builds up the social reality of which those cravings are a part.

And third, the very notion of “satisfaction” changes dramatically as we pass from the appetites to the passions. The creature eats and is no longer hungry. What is eaten is no longer available to satisfy any other creature. There is, then, a sense in which the appetites are decisively self-limiting and necessarily involve a struggle for competitive advantage. But the situation is quite different with mental passions. The passions are never satiated by achievement; they never come to an end. At the same time, their exercise never depletes their environment but always enriches it. Even the dissent of experienced practitioners builds up the shared framework of a profession as effectively as work that adheres to established standards and interpretations. Yet this “environment” is strangely fragile; the articulate system has no reality apart from human memory and the acts that maintain the system of practices. In this work of maintenance, achievements of small compass are comparable in importance to works of genius.

Appetites and passions belong, then, to different levels in the person. The two levels interact: “[d]esire and emotion may educate our intelligence, as they do when we grow up to sexual maturity and parenthood; and the reverse may happen when we control and refashion our appetites in conformity to social custom” (PK 320). However, appetites and passions can and do conflict. As he points out in *The Study of Man*, the objects of the mental passions (“noble actions, works of art or science”) “serve no material need, but demand, on the contrary, material sacrifices” (SM 86). It is this conflict that creates the logical space in which it is possible to speak of “self-compulsion”; one dimension of the self must give way to another. Our way of resolving such conflicts is probably the primary determinant of personality and character.

All of this helps us see what makes a person different from the beast to which a human being would be reduced in the absence of such articulate systems. Yet it seems to do little to clarify what he means by “moral” or what differentiates the moral from the intellectual passions. Habitation in a community and trusting reception of a tradition (or, actually, habitation in multiple communities and reception of a rich variety of traditions) are thus the *sine qua non* of distinctively personal knowing, seeking, and acting. From this we can begin to appreciate several important features of Polanyi’s conception of “moral.” The moral is not grounded pre-culturally in bodily nature or an innate “moral sense.” Ego-centered individuality and self-fulfillment have no part in morality, but constitute its contrast. What is thought to be moral cannot be conceived apart from obligations defined by a convivial order. Moral practice involves sacrifices and self-transcendence. Yet all of these characteristics can also be said to apply to the pursuit of science and the fashioning of fine violins and the evaluation of student term papers. We have not, then, yet arrived at the distinctive meaning “moral” carries in Polanyi’s work.

2.2 THE RELATION OF THE INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL PASSIONS

Polanyi makes no clear distinction between the intellectual and the moral passions. Both are “mental passions”; both are “fiduciary passions” (PK 303). In *Personal Knowledge*, he refers to the passion for justice as an intellectual passion (PK 309), and surely if any of the passions are moral passions it is the passion for justice. His lists of moral passions sometimes include the passion for truth. He writes that “[m]oral judgments are appraisals and as such are akin to intellectual valuations” (214), and when, in “Conviviality,” he turns explicitly to moral aspirations, he introduces them as “an extension of [the person’s] more specifically intellectual passions” (PK 214). Once he has discarded critical philosophy’s separation of knowledge from evaluation, truth becomes the bearer of value, knowledge claims instantiate appraisals, and moral judgments cannot be considered apart from the perceptions, interpretations, and background understanding out of which such judgments are formed. The distinction between truth and rightness is permanently blurred: “The acts of doing and knowing, the valuation and the understanding of meanings, are thus seen to be only different aspects of the act of extending our person into the subsidiary awareness of particulars which compose a whole” (65).

Why, then, does he not altogether discard the distinction between the intellectual and the moral? Although he does not say, I think his reasons are partly conventional and partly conceptual. On the conventional side, we have a rough and ready distinction between the moral and the intellectual that functions as part of our “common sense.” Even if valuation and understanding are “different aspects” of a single sort of act, it is conventional and probably important to recognize that difference within the act of personal extension. We can honor a generalized separation between “codes of behavior” and “forms of knowledge” (333) without introducing an unbridgeable chasm between the practical and the speculative. Moreover, some motivations and

some objectives and some goods seem particularly important in the civic realm, and when Polanyi writes about the moral passions, he is almost always writing about the civic realm: the passions he recognizes as moral passions are predominantly the passions for justice, brotherhood, equality, and freedom.

Nonetheless, Polanyi's continuing use of the distinction between the moral and the intellectual is not simply a bow in the direction of common sense. He seems to use the notion of moral passion to uncover layers of motivation that are deeper than conscious volition and interests, motivations that we might name as the power of love and devotion. It is hard to cite conclusive support for this claim, but when he writes of moral passions in "Beyond Nihilism," he speaks of "a fierce passion for humanity" (bn 6), "that sublime and sacred love of humanity," the "deep horror of tyranny," the "compassionate zeal for the oppressed," and the "sacred love of the fatherland" (bn 14). These are motivations of a sort that can make bearable supreme self-sacrifice; they are motivations that therefore open on the sacramental and the demonic. The passion for truth, construed generally, would certainly be a passion of this same sort, but the intellectual passion of, say, the scientist, artist, or engineer in the execution of his calling does not seem to be underwritten by the deepest resources and strengths of personal being in the same way. What Polanyi does explicitly say is that "moral judgments cut much deeper than intellectual valuations" because moral excellence is excellence of "our whole person" (PK 215), and not of some particular faculties or practices. Presumably, then, the exercise of moral passions involves a broader and more complex integration of more variable ranges of subsidiary particulars than even the highest intellectual judgments. Though intellectual judgments may, at the highest levels, organize myriad subsidiary elements into unprecedented comprehensive patterns, they might nevertheless be said to involve the organization of subsidiaries derived from a single dimension of experience.

A further indication of Polanyi's understanding and use of "moral" can be found in his brief 1970 essay "Transcendence and Self-transcendence." He begins by reviewing the hierarchical structure of emergence whereby each "level" of an entity leaves open boundaries that are controlled by principles operating at the next higher level. He there places the "principle of responsible choice" above the "principle of intelligence":

But the principle of intelligence is not the ultimate principle or the highest level in the hierarchy governing the functioning of living beings. Just as the sensory-motor levels of life leave themselves open to the control of intelligence, so the principle of intelligence leaves its powers open to the still higher principle of responsible choice. Human beings exercise responsibilities within a social setting and a framework of obligations which transcend the principle of intelligence. Responsible choice in a convivial setting controls the indeterminate powers of intelligence and sets the boundary conditions for their applications (ts 91).

This passage is particularly notable for its elevation of the moral above the intellectual, and this initially seems contrary to his earlier treatment of the moral as a subclass of the intellectual. One possibility is, of course, that his thinking altered over the course of time, but we should not be hasty in concluding that. The exercise of responsible choice is not the same thing as a moral passion. One could, I think, coherently hold moral and intellectual passions to be confreres while also holding that responsible choice is a higher order human activity than intelligent inquiry or cognitive knowing. While moral longings and moral judgments are surely very much tangled together, it does seem important to distinguish, at least theoretically, between, on the one hand, the active valuing that constitutes the impulse to strive after the good as one understands it and, on the other hand, the integration and discernment that are involved in the choice of this course of action rather than that and in the evaluation of what has already been done by oneself or another.

2.3 THE SEPARATION OF MORAL PASSIONS FROM MORAL IDEALS

These subtle differentiations of the moral from the intellectual do help us understand how the moral or civic passions might more readily become “homeless,” separated from their proper objects, than intellectual passions. The restless mind, impelled by the full energy of its capacity for commitment and devotion, is social through and through. Not only is it thrown into a social world, it has received its distinctive passionate being by way of its relations with others. It can be who it is only through embracing some model of proper human interaction. If it confronts, as a convivial setting, a civic vacuum, devoid of any proposed self-transcending possibilities, it can only, as it were, collapse upon itself. The impoverished possibilities that are proposed for realization speak powerfully to the appetites, but not to the passions. By default, the passions seize upon the same objects as the appetites. This leaves the appetites unrestrained (and even overlaid with a new energy and a new determination) at the same time that it cuts away the higher layers of human social possibility.

Nihilism is not the absence of values; it is the reduction or constriction of values to the immediate interests (usually material interests) of the self-referencing agent. The project of the nihilist is therefore to turn us back into very sophisticated (and very dangerous) beasts, with appetites, but without any sense of the intrinsically good. From Polanyi’s point of view, the moral emerges only with self-transcending commitment to a social reality whose well-being trumps my own; it emerges only with a sense of responsibility for, dedication to, and service of that transpersonal reality. Thus, there is a sense in which the nihilist, having resolutely denied the reality and operant force of transpersonal moral ideals, gives a true, if not wholly correct, description of the social reality that she inhabits: it is a world in which there are no authentic values higher than the interests of the particular agent, a world in which any residual use of moral language is merely a rhetorical or ideological disguise for material forces, a world in which the “right” belongs to power. Polanyi’s point is that such a world constitutes a devastating impoverishment of human possibility, a form of “self-immolation.”

Yet Polanyi persists in asserting that this situation is a situation of contradiction. In such a situation, the moral passions are not, in fact, reduced to appetites, and they do not disappear. They continue to operate in an “inverted” way. But what is it, exactly, that continues to operate? As Polanyi tells the story, it seems to be a thirst for a better future, tied now to a vastly impoverished sense of what a better future would be. But there seems to be another hunger as well. Blind to her own errors, the personal or political nihilist takes great pride in incisive, uncompromising honesty, in denouncing and exposing ideology and hypocrisy and self-deception. It seems that nothing can finally stamp out (or at least, more precisely, nothing so far has been able to stamp out) the hope of salvation or the conviction of the righteousness of truth. Moral inversion thus offers mute testimony to what it denies and dismantles.

The powers of self-transcendence are unhoused—cut free from (or taught to distrust) any tradition worthy of self-sacrifice—but they spring from the very traditions that they are now taught to ridicule. Since no one can stand outside of all traditions, the passions shaped and encouraged by a tradition will continue to operate even when the tradition has been called into question (even a post-Christian culture “carries in its blood” the heritage of Christian eschatology [LL 109]). Only by a complete destruction of the intellectual heritage of the West could the moral passions now in play be eliminated. With the emergence of language, and the vast articulate systems that the use of language—particularly the use of durable and transgenerationally potent written language—makes possible, *homo sapiens* has entered into a realm of possibility from which it is not possible to retreat.

3. Ethnocentric Absolutism?

As we have seen, Najder thinks that Polanyi's theory of moral inversion fails as a sociological and historical study in part because Polanyi lacks a neutral conception of "moral." This complaint is closely related to Najder's reasons for asserting that if moral inversion is being proposed as an "axiological scheme," it is a badly flawed one. Under this heading he objects that Polanyi inconsistently claims universal validity for his own socially relative moral values which, as he freely admits, "are derived from nineteenth-century English and American liberalism" (Najder 1968, 370). His "ethnocentric absolutism" (370) or "absolutistic ethnocentrism" (373) guarantees that any other moral system, judged as if it were obscurely and defectively a version of his own, will appear to him to be self-contradictory. And the predictable outcome of his grand narrative of five hundred years of European history is an affirmation of the rightness of the tribal views of displaced Eastern European intellectuals of a certain generation.⁶

Najder thus presses upon us further consideration of what is certainly one of the most perplexing features of Polanyi's work: his determination to accept much of the relativizing force of historicism and the sociology of knowledge without accepting ethical relativism as the logical outcome, without debunking the self-understanding of actors, and without abandoning the public realm to the predations of power and interest. The resolution of difficulties implicit in affirming local knowledge with universal intent is, of course, the burden of his whole argument concerning "personal knowledge" as he develops it over his long career. It is, however, worthwhile to see what can be said about it in direct relation to his treatment of moral inversion.

3.1 THE RIGHT HAND AND THE LEFT HAND

On the surface, Polanyi's argument certainly seems inconsistent. In some respects, he is a thoroughgoing social constructionist. The noosphere, the realm of culture and history, "was achieved by men who, forming societies, invented language and created by it a lasting articulate framework of thought" (PK 388). Our claims and our values have no foundations apart from our affirmation of those claims and values; in all our knowing and judging we are ultimately only self-reliant. As we have seen above, the great articulate systems that provide the framework of distinctively human social life are brought into being by act and speech. He repeatedly acknowledges that all knowledge claims and all moral injunctions are socially indexed: "Our believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging" (PK 322). Or again, "Looking back from this point on the immensities of the past, we realize that all that we see there, throughout the universe, is shaped by what we now ultimately believe" (PK 404). Yet again, "No one can transcend his formative milieu very far, and beyond this area he must rely on it uncritically" (kb 133). And "To this extent I subscribe to Marx's thesis that the social being of man determines man's consciousness" (SM 83).

Yet he writes with seemingly naive confidence about truth and its accessibility, about reality and our knowledge of it. He is passionately convinced of the rectitude of his own views concerning the good society and brutally critical of positions that diverge from his own. He insists that speculative and moral judgments always are and *should* be put forward with "universal intent." He asserts that "each man has some measure of direct access to the standards of truth and rightness" (SM 89) and that "a rational decision remains valid anywhere and for all times, irrespective of the circumstances in which it was actually first arrived at" (SM 90).

And, of course, it is well known that this having it both ways is not an inadvertent inconsistency that

might have been repaired by more careful conceptualization; this insistence on these contraries is one of the axes around which his thought turns. Forcibly combining the two, he writes, “[W]e hold with universal intent a set of convictions acquired by our particular upbringing” (PK 203). From the point of critically trained intelligence, this amounts to an insupportable self-contradiction. From the point of view of postmodern irony, it exposes the deep fissures in modern thought at the same time that it images the futility of attempts to generate grand narratives. Polanyi, however, believes that he is simply representing the human calling as we all actually experience it. We are born as small, vulnerable, embodied animals with particular natural capabilities, but by virtue of the gift of language and our initiation into the distinctive layer of reality constituted by social practice, we come to be activated by cravings that no other sorts of animals can know. These cravings are shaped by particular contexts, both as to their form and as to the means and ends enlisted in their fulfillment. “[T]his matrix of my thought determines my personal calling,” he writes. “It both offers me my opportunity for seeking the truth, and limits my responsibility for arriving at my own conclusions” (kb 133). He does not believe that the cravings themselves, even allowing for their cultural inflections, are much more widely divergent than animal appetites are. We want to understand rightly and to have our judgments corroborated by social peers whose judgments we respect, to live in a social world governed by just relations, to be able to act as conscience dictates, and to be able to believe that our activity bears on some “eternal purpose.” It seems that it would surely have to be the person who wishes to dispute the universality of such cravings who would bear the burden of proof. The cravings can only be fulfilled, of course, in some particular setting by participation in some particular convivial order or community. There is no such thing as general understanding or general justice or general freedom.

So, in a contingent situation that is not of my making, I seek to establish what is true and just in and for this particular situation, and what I then come to believe to be true and just I will believe and declare to be true for all those who share this situation (since it is just that universality—that extension to the community of all concerned—that makes believing it to be true and just different from believing it to be convenient and agreeable to me). The standards of truth and rightness that I employ must, at least in some sense, transcend the particularities to which the standards of evaluation are applied. And if I reason my way, within this situation, to a judgment of the situation that my companions in this situation recognize as valid, then presumably an astute Martian visitor two centuries hence, one who fully understands the situation, including all the presuppositions and beliefs of persons living in that situation, would also be able to recognize the validity of the judgment that I make—or would be able to point out where my error lies. None of this implies, of course, that there will be perfect harmony among knowers. On the contrary, there will necessarily be disputes and conflicts—some of them stubbornly recurrent, some of them perennial, and only some of them resolvable. Polanyi stresses again and again that we are called to commitment and decision *in the face of risk and hazard*.

Polanyi’s account of the process and condition of moral inversion in European modernity provides us with a case study of an appraisal, claiming truth, generated from within a tradition and addressed to those who revere that tradition. It is the fruit of his effort to satisfy his craving for understanding of the events that have disrupted his life, called into question his beliefs, and brought him into conflict with other thinkers (including his brother) whose judgment and authority would ordinarily command his respect. It also represents his discovery of a way of coherently reaccrediting his liberal beliefs in the face of critical attacks and, at the same time, contributing (in a way distinctive to his own philosophical, rather than political, gifts) to the understanding and enactment of a more just social world. He presents this account of moral inversion to his readers as a true account, supported by evidence and reasoned argument, of what has actually happened in Europe in modernity and of the political dangers that continue to threaten freedom and democracy. As an account of what has happened, it is meant to support the further normative judgment that what happened constituted nothing less than

an abomination that is beyond any justification; it was an abomination that could and should have been prevented. The ideas that he identifies as implicated in the rise of totalitarianism are judged to be false and profoundly deceptive ideas. He is the first to admit, however, that his own views, which he holds with the full force of his own powers of personal commitment, are the views of a person who is particularly situated and who might be wrong. This is what it means to take personal responsibility for our beliefs. He is particularly explicit about this at the end of *Science, Faith and Society*. Having vigorously criticized the contemporary European situation as one of moral and political, as well as intellectual, crisis, he expresses the hope that false ideas might yet be corrected and that the liberal tradition might be reinvigorated in “a renewal of cultural life and civic institutions stemming from its original civilization” (SFS 80). But having said that, he somberly acknowledges that “of course a very different line of future development may be approaching instead” (SFS 80). Liberal Western civilization may continue its decline, to be replaced by something quite different: “All these different eventualities rest ultimately with the consciences of men” (SFS 80).

His convictions and his values are the convictions and values of a man formed by the liberal European tradition, and since “no human mind can function without accepting authority, custom, and tradition” (tc 41), that is the platform upon which he must stand to try to make his views (and, not incidentally, the views advanced by that tradition) more true. That we must speak from a social location and that we might be wrong are precisely the reasons that we ought to contest opposing ideas vigorously; they are not, he believes, reasons to draw back deferringly. “Human responsibility too is subject to . . . intrinsic limitations; it can operate only if embodied in human beings who are liable to failure. For no responsibility is taken where no hazard is to be met, and a hazard is a liability to failure” (SM 67).

3.2 INNOVATION AND DISSENT WITHIN A TRADITION

To the degree that we understand ourselves to be formed by a tradition, we must also understand ourselves to be responsible to and for it.⁷ It is therefore our calling (at once intellectual and moral) to support and refine that tradition, to preserve it, and to hand it on to our children. But this obligation to a tradition is, though a work of service, not an instance of slavery. Our relation to the tradition is critical and creative. We are to press at all points to refine it, to renew it, to reveal its surprising capacity (to the extent that it is true) to bear on new situations and to infuse new experiences:

[T]he capacity continually to enrich and enliven its own conceptual framework by assimilating new experience is the mark of an intelligent personality. Thus our sense of possessing intellectual control over a range of things, always combines an anticipation of meeting certain things of this kind which will be novel in some unspecifiable respects, with a reliance on ourselves to interpret them successfully by appropriately modifying our framework of anticipations (PK 103).

We are to show forth its power. Those who possess the most superior knowledge of the tradition have the greatest responsibility to display its interpretive meaning and lay bare its entailments. When it is challenged, they must defend it. When it is corrupted, they must restore it.

So the fact that Polanyi writes all that he writes about moral inversion as a man thoroughly formed by a certain political tradition, imbued with certain political values and ideals, is not an unhappy contingency that must be accepted because it cannot be avoided or overcome. It is, on the contrary, the ground of his calling and

the framework of his responsibility.

Although “[m]entally, we are called into being by accepting an idiom of thought” (PK 376), our appropriation of that idiom will frequently bring us into conflict with those from whom we learned it. This conflict is to be welcomed since it is a sign of the vitality of the tradition; moreover, it underlines that it is the whole of the tradition, rather than those who uphold it or any particular ideas or practices within it, which should be the object of our loyalty. “The language of these ideals, anchored in the works and lives of our masters, grants to each one of us the right to uphold these ideals against any particular utterance of these same masters. For it is not to their person, but to what we understand to be their teaching, that we pledge ourselves” (PK 377). I think it is important to appreciate the fact that he considers Marxists, fascists, and nihilists to belong to this same tradition. They are dissenters within it, advancing views of freedom and political life and the highest good that owe much to the Western liberal and Enlightenment tradition, even while some of their central claims diverge from the core conceptions of the liberal tradition. They advance these views with passion, in the name of truth, and they must be engaged with passion, in the name of truth. To do anything else would be the worst sort of dereliction of duty. The absorption of dissenting views into a tradition of thought can only ever be “a decision, originating in our own personal judgment, to modify the premises of our judgment, and thus to modify our intellectual existence, so as to become more satisfying to ourselves” (PK 106). The same thing is true when dissenting proposals are rejected by a representative of a tradition: the rejection is “a decision, originating in our own personal judgment” to resist the modification out of fidelity to the contested beliefs. Thus Polanyi writes:

Of course, believing as I do in the reality of truth, justice, and charity, I am opposed to a theory which denies it and I condemn a society which carries this denial into practice. But I do not assume that I can force my view on my opponents by argument. Though I accept truth as existing independently of my knowledge of it, and as accessible to all men, I admit my inability to compel anyone to see it. Though I believe that others love the truth as I do, I can see no way to force their assent to this view. I have described how our love of truth is usually affirmed by adherence to a traditional practice within a community dedicated to it. But I can give no reason why such a community, or its practice, should live—any more than why I should live myself. My adherence to the community, if given, is an act of ultimate conviction and remains so whether resulting from mature choice or mainly determined by early education (SFS 81).

To embrace freedom of conscience in full seriousness is to commit oneself to risk, hazard, and conflict. It is to give up all hope of compelling assent, either by force or by demonstration. Nonetheless, where we cannot compel, we may yet persuade. Recall that what marks fanaticism as an exceptionally dangerous social force is the inaccessibility of the agent’s moral motives to reason and examination, evaluation and persuasion.

3.3. PERSUASION AS A HEURISTIC PASSION

Persuasion, one of the forms intellectual passions take, is an art of persistent hope. Near the beginning of *The Study of Man*, Polanyi says, “Tonight I shall try to transmit this conviction to you” though “all I have to say may not convince you” (SM 13). It is also an admission of the fundamental limits we face as fallible knowers and socially located self-determining beings:

I shall not argue with the sceptic. It would not be consistent with my own views if I expected him to abandon a complete system of beliefs on account of any particular series

of difficulties. Besides, by this time it should be clear how far-reaching are in my own opinion the changes in outlook that are required in order to establish a stable alternative to the objectivist position. I cannot hope to do more in this book than to exhibit a possibility which like-minded people may wish to explore (PK 315).

Yet the strategies of persuasion that Polanyi employs in his defense of a free society display both how hard-nosed the practice of this art can be and how deeply any effort at persuasion requires us to penetrate both into our own framework of belief and into the conceptual system of the person whose views we aspire to change.

Persuasion requires self-knowledge and honesty. A person unaware of her commitments or unwilling to examine and acknowledge them can only engage in manipulative propaganda. Polanyi believes he has been open and honest about the grounding of his moral judgments in a particular tradition; he believes that his adversary, in contrast, has been deceptive in ways that prevent the tacit dimension of his knowing (i.e., his moral passions) from being recognized and taken into account.

Polanyi believes he can account for features of his adversary's position that the adversary cannot account for—namely, the inconsistencies within it. To the extent that this is true, his is the more comprehensive account of the adversary's own belief and activity. This is why he repeatedly returns to the work of exposing contradictions in his adversary's position, making the case that the alternative that he himself defends avoids similar discrepancies between, among other things, the personal witness of the theorist and the theory itself. This is so because the views with which he is engaged can be shown, he believes, to represent a pathological development within his own tradition, a development that can be identified and analyzed. We confront not two competing traditions but one tradition in healthy and unhealthy forms. He thus believes that his views have a coherence that the competing views lack. A coherent system of beliefs is superior to an incoherent one—this is why our powers of critical analysis are great allies in sorting out truth from error. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that coherence itself is no guarantee of truth. As he says in *Personal Knowledge*, coherence, by itself, is a criterion of stability, not truth. "It may equally stabilize an erroneous or a true view of the universe" (PK 294).

Accordingly, Polanyi builds a case that his views have a heuristic value lacking in the views of his opponent, that his views, if embraced and acted upon, will be fruitful where those of his adversary have proved destructive. To some extent, then, he looks to the future for validation of his views and requires a leap of faith in the testing of his views. However, it is certainly his suggestion that the defeat of fascism, the witness of the anti-Soviet struggles in Eastern and Central Europe, and the severe deprivations and extreme violence required to uphold totalitarian governments ought to count powerfully against the validity of these social arrangements and the theories that legitimate them.

Polanyi makes the strongest case he can in support of his own convictions as to where truth and falsity lie, and he does this in the hope of inducing conversion. Human judgment being what it is, we all must make choices without any guarantee that we have chosen rightly, and we can all only lay out our interlinking beliefs and commitments on the authority of our own conviction. Polanyi has made his case for liberalism; let others make their case for what they believe. Their listeners must decide who is right, and the decisions and actions of those listeners will constitute the socially constructed future. But that construction will necessarily take place within the limits of the human condition, which it cannot violate. Writing, in *Meaning*, of Anglo-American liberalism, he says, "Its program was to let everyone state his beliefs and to allow others to listen and form their

own opinions; the ideas which would prevail in a free and open battle of wits would be as close an approximation to the truth as can be humanly achieved” (M 7).

Abbreviations

bn	“Beyond Nihilism”
kb	“Knowing and Being”
LL	<i>The Logic of Liberty</i>
M	<i>Meaning</i>
mhr	“Message of the Hungarian Revolution”
mm	“On the Modern Mind”
PK	<i>Personal Knowledge</i>
SFS	<i>Science, Faith and Society</i>
SM	<i>The Study of Man.</i>
tc	“The Two Cultures”
TD	<i>The Tacit Dimension</i>
ts	“Transcendence and Self-transcendence”

Endnotes

¹The term “moral inversion” was not used in the text of *Science, Faith and Society* (1946), but the logic of moral inversion was nonetheless explored in section 3, in which he considered the origins of “the modern crisis,” instantiated in both totalitarian states and metaphysical nihilism. The term “moral inversion” appeared in 1951 in *The Logic of Liberty*; see chapter 7, pages 93–110 (much of this reappears word for word in *Meaning*, chapter 1, “The Eclipse of Thought”). Najder asserts that this was the first use of the term (Najder 1968, 365). In 1958, *Personal Knowledge* offered a well-developed consideration of moral inversion (227–45), as well as the arguments on which the theory rested. There Polanyi referred to the discussion in *The Logic of Liberty* as “a tentative study” of the principle of moral inversion, and noted that he had first “outlined” the mechanism of the inversion in *Science, Faith and Society* (PK 232, 233 n. 1). In 1959, moral inversion was discussed in “The Two Cultures,” and in 1960, it was explored extensively in “Beyond Nihilism” (both of which are reproduced in *Knowing and Being*; see especially 14, 16–18, 21–22, and 44–45). When *Science, Faith and Society* was republished in 1964, he added new prefatory material, “Background and Prospect,” in which he further elaborated the notion of moral inversion (17–18). In 1965, the topic was again explored in “On the Modern Mind” (see especially 12–13, 18–20). Chapter 3 of *The Tacit Dimension* belonged to the same line of development, though the term was not used (see especially 55–63). In *Meaning*, in 1975, he once again discussed moral inversion explicitly, though the relevant passages occurred, for the most part, in chapters drawn from previously published works (see 17–18, 28, 63, 116, 213).

²“To deny “any intrinsic power to thought” is to deny “any grounds for claiming freedom of thought” (TD 3–4). Or again: “If thought and reason are nothing in themselves, it is meaningless to demand that thought be set free” (M 14).

³Even so, true, complete, or actual moral inversion is not perfectly stable—the contradiction between theory and witness is still there, though it is even more obscured.

⁴It is, of course, the burden of Polanyi’s larger argument that this reduction is a mistake. For especially concise statements of the alternative, see SM 67ff., 86, and M 214–15.

⁵In a number of the places where he discusses the limitations reality places upon the realization of our aspirations, he ends with runic allusions to unspecified “religion” (see especially the last paragraph of *The Tacit Dimension*). It is not clear to me whether he is thinking of the means by which Judaism and Christianity have combined a deep sense of fallenness and imperfection with an abiding, though chastened, hope, or whether he has in mind, instead, some sort of recovery (“once religious faith is released from pressure by an absurd vision of the universe” [TD 92]) of the Christian confidence in transcendent, eternal perfection.

⁶Moreover, Najder suggests that Polanyi's unrepentant liberal individualism makes it impossible for him to appreciate the actual meaning and implications of the social constructionist views that he voices but does not instantiate in his work. This is an exceptionally interesting criticism that I hope to explore in another essay.

⁷Here and elsewhere I have used "tradition" and "community" in the singular for simplicity's sake. We all, of course, participate in multiple articulate systems, traditions, and convivial orders.

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