

# Virtues, Ideals, and the Convivial Community: Further Steps Toward a Polanyian Ethics

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**ABSTRACT** Key Words: Michael Polanyi, moral point of view, deontological ethics, moral passions, virtue ethics, utilitarianism, satisfactions, ideals.

*The other articles in this issue plus other recent articles on Polanyi's ethics have helped clarify Polanyi's distinctive contribution to ethical theory. This article seeks to integrate these insights with Polanyi's somewhat diffuse treatment of ethics by suggesting what features would be included in a distinctively Polanyian moral point of view. Grounded in psychological satisfactions, social dynamics, and values and ideals regarded as real, Polanyian ethics incorporates features of deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethics and would support a practice of moral discovery.*

The goal of this essay is to take a further step toward articulating the contours of a distinctively Polanyian ethics. I am particularly interested in considering how Polanyian ethics can best be formulated so as to facilitate its dissemination, especially in the classroom. The modest and basically programmatic step attempted here relies upon some significant steps taken in recent years. The essays of Charles McCoy, D. M. Yeager, Mark Discher, and Elizabeth Newman published in volume 29:1 of this journal significantly advanced understanding of Polanyi's approach to ethics as a culminating dimension of human responsibility. The essays by Ursula Goodenough and Terrence Deacon, Phil Mullins, and D. M. Yeager published in this issue contribute further insights to the articulation of a Polanyian ethics. I will incorporate some of these insights into this essay, emphasizing the ways in which the articles complement each other.

The essays by McCoy and Yeager in volume 29:1 are particularly successful in offering an overview of Polanyi's unique approach to ethics. McCoy states that Polanyi "sees ethics, not as an isolated specialty of philosophy or theology, but rather as central to the wholeness of human action in achieving knowledge and seeking to act responsibly in every sphere of life. The morality of personal knowing and the commitments involved are not peripheral but pervade the historical, communal nature of human existence."<sup>1</sup> To treat ethics, as is typically done in university courses, as a special discipline with a distinctive methodology is likely to sunder it from its comprehensive role in human existence.

Moral judgments cut much deeper than intellectual valuations. A man may be consumed by an intellectual passion; he may be a man of genius, yet be also sycophantic, vain, envious and spiteful. Though a prince of letters, he would be a despicable person. For men are valued as men according to their moral force; and the outcome of our moral striving is assessed, not as the success or failure of any external performance of ours, but by its effect on our whole person. Accordingly, moral rules control our whole selves rather than the exercise of our faculties, and to comply with a code of morality, custom and law, is to live by it in a far more comprehensive sense than is involved in observing certain scientific and artistic standards. (PK 214-215)

A Polanyian ethics, then, deals with a whole self and, as we shall see, with whole societies.

Those wanting to teach the Polanyian approach to ethics are presented with a sizeable challenge. How can they square the comprehensive Polanyian understanding of ethics with the traditional way that ethical theories are treated as disjunctive alternatives? Typical courses introduce students successively to rule-stressing deontological views of morality, result-calculating utilitarian theories, and character-emphasizing theories of virtue ethics. Fortunately, in the past several decades, ethical theoreticians have creatively set forth various proposals about how to integrate the formerly discrete theories. Consequently, our age seems as if it would be more receptive to Polanyi's synoptic approach to ethics than Polanyi's own era was. The manner in which I will proceed is by showing how Polanyi's comprehensive vision includes and interprets in interesting ways some typical expression(s) of deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and other influential perspectives taken on moral matters. Then I will proceed to highlight additional features of Polanyi's thought that bear on morality.

## Deontology and the Moral Point of View

First, let us examine deontological approaches to ethics. Deontological ethics states that dutiful obedience to some standard of morality is what determines that which is morally right. Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* is the classical text of deontology; it utilizes reason in combination with respect for the moral law to determine what is morally right. But rather than examining Kant's thought in Polanyian light, I prefer to discuss the notions of a more recent thinker in the deontological tradition (who uses an admixture of social contract theory), a writer who takes obedience to rationally justifiable rules as the key to morality. Nearly half a century ago Kurt Baier argued along essentially Kantian lines for taking up "the moral point of view" as the best way to secure moral agreement and thereby ensure social control. By "the moral point of view," Baier meant "a point of view which furnishes a court of arbitration for conflicts of interest. Hence it cannot (logically) be identical with the point of view of any particular person or group of persons."<sup>2</sup> There are two related principles incorporated in Baier's formulation. One is the principle that the moral point of view overrides self-interest (or indeed the interests of any particular person or group). The second is that a universal point of view is required that considers impartially the interests of all stakeholders. It can be seen that Baier's formulation is influenced by Kant's categorical imperative: the notion that the subjective maxim guiding any individual's action should be universalizable and reversible, that is, followed as the guiding rule by anyone in similar circumstances and applicable to oneself as recipient as well as agent.

There are many indications that Polanyi would be congenial to speaking of a comprehensive framework such as a moral point of view. His well-known discussion of Azande magic in *Personal Knowledge* is one example of his consideration of an all-encompassing framework of interpretation. Another example, repeated in a number of his writings, is the Marxist, or more specifically, the Communist worldview. In reflecting upon the message of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, Polanyi cites the poem authored by the Bulgarian Communist Dimitar Metodiev that speaks of a worldview as seeing with a pair of glasses. In breaking free of the closed system of thought that was Communism, Metodiev used the image of smashing the glasses as a leitmotiv (*KB* 30). Polanyi, of course, generally used the language of dwelling in and breaking out.

The notion of a moral point of view is unlike a closed system of thought, such as Azande magic or Communism, "that can interpret in its own terms any possible fact" (*KB* 31). For the moral point of view can exist as a selectable alternative to a prudential or self-interested point of view. Situations dictate when assuming the glasses of the moral point of view is called for. When decisions or actions bear on the health, welfare, or basic rights of individuals, the moral point of view ought to be dwelt in to determine what is the most

moral decision. The act of assuming the moral point of view should be regarded as a practice that leads to insight and possible action.

To the best of my knowledge, Polanyi never explicitly speaks about the (or a) moral point of view. Yet because he used frameworks in his discussion of how our thought is organized systematically, it makes sense to see what a moral framework, developed in relation to the Western tradition of ethics, would look like. Therefore, I will consolidate the comprehensive moral considerations that Polanyi discusses into the framework of a Polanyian moral point of view.

Some aspects of Polanyi's moral thought overlap Baier's principles, but they are expressed idiosyncratically by Polanyi. Rather than emphasizing the need to override self-interest, he speaks of the moral significance of responding to moral passions (as a variety of intellectual passions) instead of merely satisfying the appetites.<sup>3</sup> Intellectual passions manifest selective, heuristic and persuasive functions, each of which is directed at understanding and extolling features of the world rather than serving selfish interests. "Heuristic passion seeks no personal possession. It sets out not to conquer, but to enrich the world" (*PK* 150). Intellectual passions fund particular systems of thought, like science, art, religion, morality and law, with purpose and force "which try to evoke and impose correct modes of feeling" (*PK* 133). The sense of "rightness" expressed by indwelt morality, as with the other systems mentioned, is directed outward toward understanding of and action in the world. On the other hand, when considerations of self-interest are the dominant motivating factors influencing a person's thought and action, manipulation and deception in the service of the satisfaction of appetites prevail. All too often the language of morality constitutes part of the disguise. Only when one indwells the moral point of view with conviction and commitment is self-interest truly overridden.

The second double-edged principle considered by Baier to constitute the moral point of view is the impartial consideration of the interests of all persons affected by the moral situation. Impartiality and universalization are co-equal in this principle. To what extent does Polanyi honor each of them? Both of these terms conjure up notions of the objectivism that Polanyi fought so valiantly. If all understanding is carried out in the service of passions linked to one's self-set and communal standards, does it make sense to speak of neutral impartiality? A person must *apply* any universal rule to situations by relying on unspecifiable skills. So, strictly speaking, Baier's second component of a moral point of view does not seem congruent with Polanyian thought. Yet it would be contrary to much of what Polanyi argues for to think that because objectivism is bankrupt we are consigned to a relativism of individual experience.

Polanyian moral thought rests upon a version of moral realism that, while honoring the importance of cultural context, stifles from the beginning any relativism. First, in contrast to the empiricist tendencies of Anglo-American thought during the past century, a thought world in which values are regarded as merely subjective or emotive, Polanyi refers to values and ideals as *real* and powerful. "To trust that a thing we know is real is, in this sense, to feel that it has the independence and power for manifesting itself in yet unthought of ways in the future." (*TD* 32). Acting ethically is a skill that involves depending upon and expressing the appropriate real values and ideals, affirmed in some community of interpretation, that are pertinent to a situation. Prior to acting ethically, another skill must be employed, to wit, the skill of understanding both the details of the situation and what values apply to this particular situation. The determination of relevant values in turn depends upon being able to rely upon the "correct modes of feeling" previously alluded to. In the sort of contested situation Baier refers to, where a conflict of interests is involved, the correct modes of feeling would likely link one to such values as justice and care and make one sensitive to the rights of those involved

in the situation.

Second, an assessment of a moral situation is undertaken out of a commitment to moral truth. Acting upon those real values determined to be salient in some moral situation constitutes moral truth. Rather than speaking with Baier and Kant of seeking some universalizable rule, Polanyi attends to the intentionality of the person utilizing moral skill. If the person judges and acts with *universal intent*, this is the mark of the personal knowing required for enacting moral truth. Being committed to moral truth and acting out of that commitment is all that can be asked of a person addressing a moral dilemma. Polanyi expresses these points in the following powerful passage.

It is the act of commitment in its full structure that saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective. Intellectual commitment is a responsible decision, in submission to the compelling claims of what in good conscience I conceive to be true. It is an act of hope, striving to fulfil an obligation within a personal situation for which I am not responsible and which therefore determines my calling. This hope and this obligation are expressed in the universal intent of personal knowledge. (*PK 65*)

So far, the Polanyian moral point of view includes the skillful use of moral passions, the acknowledgement of the powerful reality of values and ideals, and taking the stance of universal intent in seeking moral truth. Before we leave the comparison of Polanyi's moral theory to that of deontology, one additional observation is much needed. Polanyi is sympathetic to the senses of obligation and rightness that are found in deontological theories. Persons are called to attend to the call of conscience and submit to their communally affirmed values and ideals. Rightness, however, is not something imposed by a social authority; rather it is a communally endorsed standard guiding the performance of one seeking to do the good with universal intent. Values like truth, beauty and justice do not exist in some sort of Platonic eternal ideal realm, for they are "things which can be apprehended only in serving them" (*PK 279*). Our obligation to them flows out of our commitment to them, which in turn is based on our assessment of them as real and worthy of respect.

## Utilitarianism and Social Contract Theories

Next, let us turn to assay Polanyi's take on utilitarianism, the view that the morally best acts are those that maximize pleasure (hedonistic utilitarianism) or maximize expected preference fulfillment (preference utilitarianism). Polanyi considers utilitarian calculations to be disembodied expressions of materialism rather than passionate commitments to moral ideals engaged with universal intent (*M 11*). Such calculations are cousins to the idea within socialism and communism that the pursuit of scientific knowledge should be tied to anticipated public benefit. In these political systems, a collective entity undermines the freedom of the individual responsibly to pursue her or his passions. But it is free inquiry that has the power to produce on a regular basis that understanding of reality capable of producing real public benefit.

Interestingly, Polanyi criticizes utilitarianism and its "emotional brother" (*PK 211*), romanticism, for their shallow individualism. This view is striking because utilitarianism is generally classified as a theory that, in contrast to ethical egoism, is group-centered rather than individualistic. Maximum utility is that which conveys the greatest amount of good to the *greatest number of people*. Polanyi calls utilitarianism individualistic because it privileges individual desires and in effect regards society as an aggregate of individuals. Utilitarianism presupposes maximizing each individual's freedom from social restraints so that

a summation of subjective ends prevails over substantive social obligations (*M* 201).

Does Polanyi thoroughly reject social contract theories of ethics as well as utilitarianism? Both view moral thought as socially constructed. Certainly Polanyi is no fan of sociological or psychoanalytic construals of morality, which tend to reduce moral injunctions to such things as protections of power or sublimations of sexuality.

Our morally neutral account of all human affairs has caused our youth, and our educated people in general, to regard all moral professions as mere deceptions – or at best as self-deceptions. For once we induce ourselves to regard all established rules of moral conduct as mere conventions, we must come to suspect our own moral motives, and thus our best impulses are silenced and driven underground. (*M* 23)

Yet Polanyi's position is not easily categorized as opposed en toto to social constructivism. For Polanyi is abundantly aware of the active role played by symbolism in the construction of culture. Indeed, the main focus of *Meaning* is upon the different forms such social construction may take. Moreover, as Mullins and McCoy each emphasize, the constructive role of the convivial community and the importance of tradition in establishing an individual's sense of calling are absolutely essential to Polanyi's thought. The important point to bear in mind is this: Polanyi's notion of social constructivism is tied to the realities of — on the subjective side — intellectual passions seeking contact with — on the objective side — a plethora of realities ranging from perceptions of dewdrops and elephants to ideals of beauty and justice. The sociologist and psychoanalyst are critiqued not because of their constructivism but because of their reductionism. Passionate commitment to loving others is not merely the expression of an insecure person seeking reciprocal affirmation. The ideal of love is a reality worthy of honor and reverence even though its reality could not be recognized apart from a symbolization process.

The Polyanian moral point of view consequently contains an acknowledgment of the social character of values that command our respect. When one faces a moral dilemma, one of the sources for inspiration that one should turn to is the tradition that has shaped one's sense of what is worth living for. The symbols just referred to are not just our own. They are part of a social inheritance that roots us in a culture and nurtures our moral vision. Furthermore, as thoroughly social beings, we are called not just to turn to tradition, but also to engage in convivial discourse with others in the communities with which we identify (*PK* 210). One of the keys to being a moral person, as Goodenough and Deacon emphasize (20), is to share our moral experiences with one another. When this sharing is carried out in the context of a free society that respects the integrity of individual consciences, moral existence is most likely to flourish.

The ideal of a free society is in the first place to be a *good* society; a body of men who respect truth, desire justice and love their fellows. It is only because these aspirations coincide with the claims of our own conscience, that the institutions which secure their pursuit are recognized by us as the safeguards of our freedom. It is misleading to describe a society thus constituted, which is an instrument of our consciences, as established for the sake of our individual selves; for it protects our conscience from our own greed, ambition, etc., as much as it protects it against corruption by others. Morally, men live by what they sacrifice to their conscience; therefore the citizen of a free society, much of whose moral life is organized through his civic contacts, largely depends on society for his moral existence. (*LL* 36)

Not only will the Polanyian moral point of view endorse consultation of the traditions and communities that shape a person making moral decisions, it will celebrate the importance of rational discourse in reaching those decisions. Yes, seeking moral truth is a skill, but in relying on moral standards it is not simply a tacit skill. For moral standards are the explicit expression of communal consensus about what sort of considerations and acts are required for individuals and their communities to flourish.<sup>4</sup> The reaching of consensus is dependent on rational discourse within the community of interpretation. “The awareness of moral truth is founded on the recognition of a valid claim, which can be reasonably argued for and supported by evidence; moral illusion, in contrast, is compulsive, like a sensory illusion” (*KB* 33). Through rational discourse, social consensus can be reached about such things as the nature and extent of rights and responsibilities; how best to characterize distributive, retributive and compensatory justice; and what ideals and obligations pertain in a certain circumstance. The way social consensus is reached in ethics is not different in kind from the way agreement is reached in science about the status of various theories on the cutting edge of research. In each case rational communication and the weight of general agreement lend authority to the decisions reached.

But the role of rationality in Polanyi extends beyond its expression in discourse. Polanyi is impressed at how reflection aided by mathematics has brought into being theories in physics that were accepted by the scientific community long before they were confirmed by empirical evidence. Einstein’s discovery of relativity theory is but one of many such cases he discusses. “Modern physics has demonstrated the power of the human mind to discover and exhibit a rationality which governs nature” (*PK* 15).<sup>5</sup> Rationality has this power not only in the realm of physics, but with respect to “domains far beyond the exact science” (*PK* 64), including morality. Polanyi would argue strenuously against any postmodern relativization of reason just as he would combat a relativizing of values.

## **Virtue Ethics, Moral Sense Theories, and the Social Dimension of Morality**

To what extent does Polanyi embrace virtue ethics or its cousin, moral sense theories? A virtue is a state of one’s character that inclines one to act in a beneficent way because of one’s conviction that such a way of acting is right. Humans may exhibit many virtuous traits – honesty, courage, generosity, charity, etc. If one has the virtue of honesty, one is motivated to act honestly in all situations and do so cheerfully because one is satisfying a standard of truthfulness one deeply believes in. Polanyi, like virtue ethicists, believes that moral actions arise out of embodied skills and deeply held commitments. He would acknowledge that ethical decision making utilizes a practical reasoning process, consistent with Aristotelian *phronesis*, that wisely applies ideals and values to specific situations. In sum, Polanyi would appreciate how virtue ethics illuminates aspects of the tacit functioning of the moral actor. But it is also the case that Polanyi never devotes attention to the virtues as such.

Similarly, Polanyi does not rely upon moral sense theories. This twofold neglect is of special interest with respect to two of the articles in this issue. For Goodenough and Deacon see their approach as congruent with virtue ethics, and Diane Yeager claims their approach is a version of a moral sense theory. Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the extent to which the article by Goodenough and Deacon (hereafter GD) is consistent with, or indeed illuminates, Polanyi’s thought. Then Yeager’s critique of the article will be assessed.

First, a word of appreciation is due Goodenough and Deacon for the way they update the evolutionary

material in Part IV of *Personal Knowledge*. I particularly have learned from their discussion of biological traits, cell-based versus brain-based awareness, and the role of masking in brain change. The authors and Polanyi share a belief in the importance of evolutionary explanations. Presumably, this belief might extend to an interest in explaining the rise of morality.

Second, I would note with Mullins (23-25) that the role of the active center of life, so important to Polanyi, is not picked up in GD. Polanyi's discussion of the logic of achievement flows from the fact that each individual center has a purpose or purposes apart from the laws of physics and chemistry that form the background out of which life emerges. I believe the three orders of emergence proposed in GD are less illuminating than the three orders that may be extracted from Polanyi's thought.<sup>6</sup> I do not see how there is any significant difference between the authors' first order ("shape interactions" [6]) and second order of emergence ("shape interactions played out over time" [6-7]). To be interactions, shape interactions must be played out over time. Moreover, as fundamental categories designed to explain different kinds of emergence, the three orders are perspicuous for not articulating any causal mechanisms that might explain how a new order arises. There is no mention of how forces are implicated in each order. While perhaps not successful in his speculations about the principles driving basic evolutionary changes, Polanyi does recognize that some account is needed (see Mullins, 25-28).

Third, any assessment of GD requires clarity about its intended scope of explanation. Here is the authors' basic thesis: "Given that we have evolved from an intensely social lineage, we are uniquely aware of what it feels like to be pro-social, and it is this awareness of what it feels like to be moral – this moral experience – that undergirds and motivates the actions of a moral person" (16). The thesis is presented as a claim about the origins of moral motivation. Strikingly, the thesis is developed in ways that are compatible with deontology as well as virtue ethics. What it feels like to be pro-social functions as an immanent moral standard that must be discovered anew by each individual and secured through symbolization. This fundamental moral experience is not something that can be developed through rational discourse, a social contract, or cultural instruction (17). Thus it appears that the authors are making a quite sweeping case for both the source of moral motivation and a standard by which to judge putative moral actions.

There is some resonance in Polanyi's thought with the sort of claim being made by Goodenough and Deacon. Polanyi claims that new values arise in human experience "subsidiarily, embodied in creative action. Only after this can they be spelled out and professed in abstract terms and this makes them appear then to have been deliberately chosen, which is absurd. The actual grounds of a value, and its very meaning, will ever lie hidden in the commitment which originally bore witness to that value" ("Creative Imagination" in R. T. Allen, ed., *Society, Economics, and Philosophy* [New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997], p. 263). Presumably, moral values associated with primate sociality might be engaged by a person as subsidiaries to some potential solution to a relationship problem and in the process be captured by symbols and made conscious. Thus perhaps Polanyi can help clarify the process whereby our primate feelings are transmuted into moral sensibility and practice.

The authors' speculations about the rise of the virtues of compassion, fair-mindedness, care, and reverence are provocative and plausible. But their extended discussion of moral motivation is less convincing. They suggest that "the heart-warming sense of gladness that we experience when we encounter moral beauty" (19) serves to stimulate moral action. If the pro-social values attained prominence in primate behavior, they surely must have gained this status through the reinforcing satisfactions they provided. Why wouldn't such

satisfactions continue as motivators on into human experience? Is there any evidence that these satisfactions have an aesthetic quality such as is implied by the discussion of moral beauty? There seems to be no obvious link between moral experience as they describe its status in the primate mind and the moral beauty they suggest is crucial for moral motivation.

More serious to consider are the questions and criticisms Yeager directs toward GD. She wonders why GD reinstates the gap between motivation and action that moral sense theories are often thought to have closed (34). But Goodenough and Deacon seem to be true to human experience in discussing this gap. Surely the difference between knowing the good and doing it is a common experience.

Next, Yeager states that if moral sense theories are true, then persons ought to be good nearly all the time and agree about moral matters (34). GD, she says, does not explain why these two conditions do not pertain. She thinks that the authors fall into trouble because they do not recognize the important role that culture plays not just in expressing morality but in developing and sustaining it. However, it seems to me that GD is not fairly understood if it is interpreted simply as a moral sense theory. The authors clearly recognize that the primate brain is not just wired for empathic actions but also for self-interested and even violent actions. On such an account, it is not surprising that human behavior is a cocktail mix of actions — moral, amoral, and immoral. I tend to see the reference to moral beauty as a perhaps unfortunate appendage to the main thrust of GD, not as crucial to its message.

Yeager then criticizes GD as relativistic because it bases morality in feelings and experiences, each of which are remarkably diverse and ineluctably subjective (34). Again, I do not think this criticism is entirely on target. The issue seems to turn not so much on the fact that GD adverts to experience and feelings, but on what it is that is felt or experienced. In Polanyian perspective, we are embodied beings inevitably relying on felt senses of adequacy, coherence, and other satisfactions (more on these shortly) as we construct meaningful engagements in the world. Goodenough and Deacon claim there are certain pro-social feelings that are basic to a moral rather than a self-interested relationship to other persons. This claim, as I have already suggested, has more of a deontological than a relativistic flavor. Because these basic pro-social feelings are developed in assorted symbol systems, they are expressed in a variety of ways, but there does seem to be some cross-cultural convergence toward agreement about basic values, as the authors note (19). GD seems to me to acknowledge adequately the moral compulsion, basic agreement, and apparent moral confusion that are part of everyday experience.

To this point, Yeager's questions and criticisms do not seem unduly damaging. But in the variety of remarks she makes about the lack of a social dimension in GD (35-37), Yeager seems entirely on target. GD runs into problems when it claims to offer a comprehensive account of the sources of moral motivation and moral standards. The authors collapse ethics into a matter of interpersonal relationships and offer empathy as the sine qua non of morality. "Morality without empathy is by definition oxymoronic" (17). But surely moral deeds may be enacted out of a sense of duty, a regarding of rights, a sense of justice or for other reasons even when empathy is lacking. Surely GD is of little use for ethical analysts trying to decide which of several problematic alternatives is most morally permissible or for interpreting the moral impact of social structures and institutions. It is ironic that an account based on primate social behavior tends to ignore human social behavior. Well, perhaps I've overstated the issue, for the authors complement their bottom-up approach with a top-down recognition that cultures develop moral ideals, rituals, and other features that heighten moral consciousness (19). But in stating that morality is never gained through instruction (17) or that rewards and

punishments commodify morality (18) the authors cut away some of the actual social processes through which morality comes to life in society. Aristotle, invoked on behalf of the authors' understanding of moral experience (17-18), views cultural instruction as essential to the development of moral virtue. He sees virtues as sets of habits gained by originally supervised repetitions of virtuous acts.

Goodenough and Deacon make it clear that human consciousness is an emergent phenomenon qualitatively different in kind from its supportive biological substrate. But do they accord an appropriate emergent status to such transpersonal products of human consciousness as social institutions, technological innovations, or theories? They say that the concepts that are central to human consciousness enable us to "inhabit a virtual reality with a life of its own" (15). But it is not clear in their article what sort of power this "virtual reality" has. Recall that they claim morality is not acquired via cultural instruction. The complexly influential realm of symbolically generated entities and structures tends to be regarded under the undifferentiated rubric of human culture. A richer notion of the emergent qualities of culture is needed.

Yeager offers the social psychology of George Herbert Mead as a helpful way of accessing and interpreting social construction and its dynamics and powers left opaque in GD. Goodenough and Deacon are similar to Mead (and Polanyi) in emphasizing the symbol-mediated, cognitive dimension of self-understanding, but Mead relies on cognition in the construction of morality to a far greater degree than is found in GD, in which emotional response plays a central role. The authors show great finesse in discussing how culture, language, and brain are involved in co-evolution (13, 14). If they wish their account of ethics to underwrite a general theory of ethics, their account would benefit from describing a) how emotion, cognition, and cultural influence are co-involved in the emergence of personal morality, and b) how the competing and shared goals of individuals, groups, and institutions are co-involved in the genealogy of social ethics.

To sum up, the article by Goodenough and Deacon offers an intriguing account of possible second-order (biological) processes that underlie human morality, but as yet they have not built a convincing explanation of how the biology impacts everyday human experience of morality. Diane Yeager writes persuasively about the social dimension of morality. Together the articles advance the cause of a holistic theory of ethics and can be usefully assimilated into the comprehensive ethical theory that is still partly nascent in the corpus of Polanyi's writings.

## **Satisfactions and Ideals**

Finally, I should like to discuss a feature of Polanyi's thought that is not often commented upon, but which I think has profound implications for understanding moral action. This feature is best grasped through considering how to respond to this question: What factors motivate human actions? I will propose both a deep level psychological answer and a high level spiritual answer. There are a variety of possible answers that fall between these extremes, but we will only consider the two responses just alluded to.

The psychological notion of motivation that appears now and again in Polanyi's writing is the seeking of *satisfaction*. Satisfactions are part of our biological heritage. The amoeba following a trail of pheromones to nutritional satisfaction is a primitive example. In human existence, there are many sorts of satisfactions: satisfactions of completion, of triumph, of release, of expression, of fulfillment, of recognition, etc. For Polanyi, the quest to understand and resulting feeling of satisfaction are essential to his notion of personal knowledge. "These feelings of comprehension go deep; we shall see them increasing in profundity all the way

from the 'I-It' relation to the 'I-Thou' relation" (*KB* 149). It should come as no surprise that there are moral satisfactions, many of them linked to moral virtues.

One of the ongoing hobgoblins of ethics is the notion of psychological egoism. This notion claims that all acts, even the seemingly most altruistic, are done out of self-interest. The fireman entering the burning building is not selflessly heroic but acting to satisfy a craving for recognition, seeking to require a nagging sense of duty, angling for promotion, etc. The psychological egoist is a master cynic and reductionist. No counter-examples seem able to budge this person from the view that all action is self-centered.

The notion of satisfaction can be used to counteract the deflation of moral ideals that results from adopting the ideas of the psychological egoist. For it can be said that all action is satisfaction-seeking, although the satisfactions are of different kinds and strengths and sometimes contrary to conventional self-interest. The key point for ethics is that there are moral satisfactions and many other sorts of the higher satisfactions that John Stuart Mill tried to articulate in qualifying Jeremy Bentham's notion of utility. An honest and intimate conversation can be a great source of satisfaction, one that builds up all involved. Satisfactions as a group are not adequately characterized as being "selfish" (see *PK* 174).

As we have seen, Polanyi contrasts intellectual passions with bodily passions, our appetites. The satisfactions endemic to each are different in nature.

By contrast to his bodily passions, which man shares with the animals, the satisfaction of his mental passions does not consume or monopolize the objects which gratify it; on the contrary, the gratification of mental passions creates objects destined to gratify the same passions in others. A discovery, a work of art, or a noble act, enrich the mind of all humanity. Man, hitherto self-centered, enters thereby on a participation in timeless and ubiquitous things. (*SM* 60)

The satisfaction of intellectual passions, then, builds culture and creates community. Great ideas inspire us. We apprentice ourselves to persons we admire. "By recognizing our heroes and masters we accept our particular calling" (*SM* 98). Out of reflection upon that which we admire or revere, we construct guiding ideals and values. A measure of the reality of these ideals and values is their power to inspire us and move us to moral action.

"Seeking moral satisfactions by living up to our models of comportment" – this statement combines the psychological dimension of moral motivation with whatever spiritual ideal we seek. Polanyi discusses at many points different ideals to which we submit. Insofar as these ideals are moral and shared by a community, Polanyian ethics deals not just with moral individuals but also with moral societies. A society manifesting a commitment not only to its own members but also to the members of other societies is a morally admirable society.

To this point, it may sound as if Polanyi thinks that all any society needs for moral improvement is a better theory. But, as suggested, Polanyi understands that in human endeavor a pervasive gap exists between what is envisioned and what is achieved (*PK* 245). Consistent with his commitment to truth as perhaps the highest of all values (*PK* 299), and in accordance with his insight into the role of utopianism in moral inversion, he acknowledges the need in any ethics for compromise and the pragmatic acceptance of the best that can be done. At times, a tragic note enters his reflections about the course of human history in cosmic context.

This cosmic emergence of meaning is inspiring. But its products were mainly plants and animals that could be satisfied with a brief existence. Men need a purpose which bears on eternity. Truth does that; our ideals do it; and 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)

Perhaps the most complete configuring of Polanyian ethics would include such factors as confession, forgiveness, grace, and eschatology, factors more often associated with religion than with ethics. If such a Kierkegaardian step is called for, it would be a step Polanyi prepares the way for rather than one he ever fully fleshes out.

## A Polanyian Moral Point of View

My exposition of Polanyian ethics is now complete except for one thing. I need to make good my promise to potential teachers of Polanyian ethics that I would provide a simple framework on which to hang key Polanyian points. That framework is a Polanyian version of the moral point of view. It obviously will be more complex than Baier's version, but to be useful it must also abstract from the full richness of Polanyi's thought. The Polanyian moral point of view is more than the passive perspective suggested by "point of view." It describes a *practice* that seeks the resolution of moral issues and may lead to action. This practice exhibits many features found in the paradigmatic Polanyian analyses of perception and discovery (*TD* 79-84). A morally responsible person will assume the cognitive framework of the moral point of view whenever a contestable situation arises that deals with important factors in individual and corporate life: matters of life and death, basic rights, health and welfare. Moral discernment employing the Polanyian moral point of view is marked by the following features:

1. With sensitivity to social dynamics, one clarifies the facts of any moral situation presenting itself, identifies all stakeholders, and seeks empathic understanding of what is at stake for each.
2. One consults the moral traditions of the convivial community that one most honors and seeks to discern (with community feedback if feasible) the values, ideals, and moral principles that apply to the situation.
3. One brackets any yearnings of appetite (thereby overriding self-interest) and with moral passion seeks the satisfactions that come from a moral resolution entered into with universal intent.
4. One identifies the moral subsidiaries (avoidance of harm, care, protective of rights, compassion, concern for the common good, fair-mindedness, etc.) that conjointly contribute to the envisioned resolution and either shares the resolution and supporting components or acts upon the insights as is appropriate.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Charles S. McCoy, "Ethics for the Post-Critical Era: Perspectives from the Thought of Michael Polanyi," *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 29:1 (2002-2003), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics*, Abridged ed. with new preface (New York:

Random House, 1965 [1958]), p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> I commend to the reader the instructive chart contrasting the appetites and the mental passions prepared by Diane Yeager – see her “Confronting the Minotaur: Moral Inversion and Polanyi’s Moral Philosophy,” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 29:1 (2002-2003), 37.

<sup>4</sup> In an article closely related to the article in this issue by Goodenough and Deacon, Ursula Goodenough defines morality as “that which allows humans to flourish in community. . . . To flourish is to be well adapted to the particular environmental circumstance in which one finds oneself, to be healthy and resilient and resourceful” (“Religious Naturalism and Naturalizing Morality,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 38:1 [March, 2003], 103-104). There is much that is appealing in this definition, but I’d offer two cautions. First, the definition could be interpreted as endorsing the individualist gratifications that Polanyi criticizes utilitarianism for. Second, because it stresses morality as that which enables individuals to relate well to specific environmental circumstances, and since such circumstances are quite varied, the definition seemingly supports a relativistic morality. In her article in this issue, Yeager suggests (34) that such relativism is common to moral theories that, like the one set forth by Goodenough and Deacon in this issue, rely heavily on moral experience. Polanyi’s emphasis on real, shared values is at least a partial counter to such relativism, although it may be open to the sort of Wittgensteinian relativism that would understand different communal values as partially incommensurable because they depend on different language games and resultant forms of life (but see *PK* 113). See Andy F. Sanders, “Science, Religion and Polanyi’s Comprehensive Realism” (*Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 26:3 [1999-2000], 84-93) for a forceful presentation of this view.

<sup>5</sup> In speaking of rationality in these instances, Polanyi is understanding reason in a broad sense that includes the powers he elsewhere speaks of as imaginative and intuitive and which also incorporates a logos-like sense of the interpenetration of epistemology and ontology. Polanyi himself had the memorable experience of envisioning a theory of adsorption in 1916 that proved to be correct, but his supervising professor pointed out that Polanyi’s derivation was incorrect (*World Authors 1950-1970*, ed. by John Wakeman [New York: H. W. Wilson Co.: 1975], p. 1151). In contrast to the broad understanding of reason, Polanyi was much less appreciative of the formal logic that dominated Anglo-American thought at the time. “Formal processes of inference cannot thrust toward the truth, for they have neither passion nor purpose. All explicit forms of reasoning, whether deductive or inductive, are impotent in themselves; they can operate only as the intellectual tools of man’s tacit powers reaching toward the hidden meaning of things” (“Faith and Reason,” *Journal of Religion* 41 [October, 1961], 243).

<sup>6</sup> I argue on Polanyian grounds for a rather different set of three orders of emergence in Walter B. Gulick, “Response to Clayton: Taxonomy of the Types and Orders of Emergence,” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 29:3 (2002-2003), 43. The deterministic dynamo-physical world constitutes the first order; the laws of physics and chemistry act system-wide. Second-order emergence arises with the advent of life; each living entity, as the active center discussed by Polanyi, has purposes that distinguish its causal impact from the blind determinism of the whole system. The advent of symbols gives humans new causal freedom; the third-order emergence of the human world is best articulated in Polanyian terms, I have argued, through extending Polanyi’s from-to structure of consciousness to a from-via-to structure where the “via” indicates the crucial role of symbols.

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