

# SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE POLITICAL ASPECTS OF PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

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**ABSTRACT** Key Words: ultimate and proximate beliefs, Bosanquet, Edmund Burke, Descartes, Heidegger, ideology, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Marx, J.S. Mill, concrete and constructive philosophy, fiduciary philosophy, Michael Polanyi, concrete and constructive politics, prescription, sense of responsibility, Rousseau, Sartre, situation, tradition.

*The political passages in Polanyi's Personal Knowledge are an integral part of his arguments against 'objectivism' and for a post-critical, personalist, fiduciary and fallibilist philosophy. This paper elaborates the social and political implications of Polanyi's emphasis upon acceptance of one's situation and the exercise in it of a sense of responsibility to transcendent ideals, as against attempts to start with a clean slate, to overcome all imperfections and to find some simple rule for political policy. Prescriptive duties and rights, and mutual trust and solidarity, are the bases of politics, and responsible action must start with them. But much of modern politics expresses a Gnostic impatience of our created and finite existence which results in arbitrary commitment to some radical and destructive ideology.*

## 1. Introduction

For the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, I have been asked to speak at the conference in Chicago and to write for *TAD* on its political aspects, presumably because I have already published a study of Polanyi's political writings in my *Beyond Liberalism*.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I shall elaborate some suggestions made there about the further implications of the political sections of *PK*, especially as they are a corollary of the post-critical, personalist, fiduciary and fallibilist philosophy which he set forth in *PK*, to which his previous reflections on politics, economics and the freedom of science had led him, and which he had earlier sketched in *Science, Faith and Society*.

His positive philosophy is the only coherent alternative to objectivism, which 'seeks to relieve us from all responsibility for the holding of our beliefs',<sup>2</sup> and to its attendant reductivisms which deny the fact of any such responsibility, all responsibility, and even consciousness itself, all of which have underwritten and reinforced the powerfully destructive forces that almost destroyed European civilisation and are still active today. To the contrary, he aims to show 'that into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge'.<sup>3</sup> In Pt I Polanyi shows that personal judgment, appraisal and decision cannot be eliminated from scientific research and that knowing is a skill which consists of attending from a set of subsidiary skills to a focal object. The former are tacitly integrated by the knower into his comprehension of the latter. It follows that what can be explicitly stated can be transmitted only by a master to an apprentice who trusts his authority and expertise, and tacitly picks up the clues of which the master is himself only tacitly aware, and thus in a tradition formed by such relationships.<sup>4</sup> In Pt II he explores further the tacit and personal components in all our thinking and action, including the passionate valuations that guide and sustain them. In all of this we may be mistaken, but there cannot be any wholly impersonal guarantees. In the final chapter, 'Conviviality', he examines the social and political

settings that can sustain or undermine the articulate systems, such as natural sciences, technology, mathematics, abstract arts and religion, which themselves foster and sustain the intellectual passions integral to human and civilised existence. All such articulate systems, because they are primarily transmitted by way of master and apprentice and by traditions, require a communal setting and the support of the wider society and its political organisation. And so Polanyi broadens his attempt in *PK* to ‘stabilize knowledge against scepticism, by including its hazardous character in the conditions of our knowledge’ to find its social and political equivalent in ‘an allegiance to a manifestly imperfect society, based on the acknowledgment that our duty lies in the service of ideals which we cannot possibly achieve’.<sup>5</sup> Following that, in Pt III the heart of *PK*, Polanyi seeks to justify personal knowledge in a back-handed manner by showing that the alternatives must themselves tacitly rely upon what they explicitly reject: all explicit knowledge is tacitly asserted and believed to be true; explicit doubt presupposes some implicit beliefs about the reasons for doubting; and truth ‘*can be thought of only by believing it*’.<sup>6</sup> It can be known only within the framework of commitment to it, where the personal, as the act of commitment, is united with the impersonal as that at which the personal aims with universal intent. Earlier (Ch. 7 §1) Polanyi had referred to the tension between, on the one hand, our claims to be guided by and to achieve universal standards and transcendent ideals, and, on the other, our awareness that we believe in them because we were taught them, and so they may appear external to us and arbitrary.<sup>7</sup> In Ch. 10 §10, he refers back to that problem. Our reliance upon our cultural heritage, and the information and guidance given by others, would reduce, he says, ‘all our convictions to the mere products of a particular location and interest, according to a critical philosophy’. But a fiduciary philosophy, accrediting intellectual commitments and personal responsibility, regards the local and particular circumstances in which we live and think as opportunities for the exercise of that responsibility. These limits are to be accepted for we cannot hold ourselves responsible beyond them nor imagine how we might exist outside any particular society. Rather, it is our calling to use what we have been given and have been taught to fulfil our universal obligations. ‘A sense of responsibility within situations requiring deliberate decisions [as in drawing conclusions from evidence] demands as its logical complement a sense of calling with respect to the processes of intellectual growth which are its necessary logical antecedents’.<sup>8</sup>

From even this very brief summary, it can be seen that the social and political themes of Ch. 7 are an integral part of his argument, and I shall now draw out some further implications of the concluding sections of Ch. 7 and Ch 10 upon acceptance of one’s situation and one’s calling to exercise responsibility in making decisions in the light of transcendent ideals and our own self-set standards for realising them.<sup>9</sup> I shall begin with the general topic of ultimate and proximate beliefs; I shall then turn to more specific topics within politics; I shall conclude with the need for acceptance of our finite and created situation, which goes far beyond politics yet bears heavily upon it.

## 2. Ultimate and Proximate Beliefs

In Pt III of *PK* Polanyi sought to articulate his ultimate beliefs, but ones which were not simply his, but universal, for it is impossible for anyone to act and think without tacitly presupposing them and committing oneself to them. But they can exist only through and as presupposed by proximate beliefs and more specific intellectual frameworks, such as those which govern the practices of modern natural science, and they, in turn, by even more specific ones, such as judgments about the result of a particular experiment. In turn, our ultimate beliefs, such as that there is a world to be known and that our perceptual organs and mental powers are generally reliable, enable us to correct our specific and particular beliefs: we can know that our eyesight and memory sometimes fail us only because of our use of them during the occasions when they do not. This is the dialectic of assimilation to an existing set of beliefs or intellectual framework and accommodation or adaptation of such a set or framework to new but as yet vaguely apprehended realities, tacitly known by attending to them from already known realities.<sup>10</sup>

Without it, human thought and civilisation could never make any progress nor adapt themselves to changes in the world. Hence positivism and relativism support each other, for they both deny the reality or necessity of these ultimate and universal beliefs by the use of which we can break out of a more specific framework of thought and create or adopt another. This denial power of thought in human life to transcend the present system of beliefs consequently entails a denial of any real power of thought, and so must explain all historical events in extraneous terms as the mere results of non-rational forces.<sup>11</sup>

The distinction between and interplay of ultimate and proximate beliefs makes possible a concrete and genuine philosophy transcending both any abstract rationalism, which seeks to construct its fields *de novo* upon some abstract principle alone (e.g., both Kant and utilitarianism in ethics; Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls, Nozick in politics), and also the positivist accumulation of particular facts.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to the latter, it finds its own special subject-matter in the universal and necessary structures of human experience, but, contrary to the former, it always reminds itself that it is an abstraction and endeavours always to start from and to return to the realities of human experience in the world, the concrete, local and historical forms in and through which the universal and necessary features are realised and expressed. Polanyi's philosophical writings are paradigms of concrete philosophy.

Corresponding to the distinction between concrete philosophy and the constructivism of pseudo-philosophy is that between concrete politics and the ideological 'isms' of constructivist politics. This, I suggest, is the real division in politics and not the utterly confused and confusing one between 'Right' and 'Left': everything identified with the one can be found in examples of the other. Its basis lies in the distinction between acceptance of one's situation, with the call to exercise responsibility in it, and the refusal to accept it and its call. On the one hand, concrete politics starts with the situation at hand and seeks to deal with the problems and challenges that it poses. Of course it can identify those problems and challenges only with general principles and conceptions, but these it takes from the traditions within which it has arisen and which it also adapts to meet novel circumstances.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, constructive politics, based on some mostly abstract scheme, is ideological in operation. That is, the situation at hand does not set the tasks to be done but is only the ground to be cleared for the building of the new edifice, or, in what Aurel Kolnai called 'reactionary Utopianism', for rebuilding an old one which is itself to be frozen against any change or adaptation.<sup>14</sup> Political movements, of thought and practice, obviously vary to the extent that they are constructivist, and there may be no clear line between a pressing need for some radical changes to meet a new situation and an ideological imposition of abstract schemes upon reality. But as Burke said of night and day, they are on the whole tolerably distinguishable.

### 3. A Clean Slate

Bertrand de Jouvenel in his *Sovereignty*, a book read and admired by Polanyi,<sup>15</sup> has a chapter on the political consequences of Descartes in which he argues that the political parallel to Descartes' insistence that 'clear and distinct conceptions' are self-evidently true would be that there would be a general convergence towards the same political truths and body of laws, which, de Jouvenel implies, has not happened.<sup>16</sup> I propose to step back a little and to show why, even in the case of Descartes himself, this could never be the case, and that, just as Descartes' method of doubt could never clear his mind of all assumptions, so too could no Cartesian politics of starting with a clean slate ever really do so.

Descartes failed because he confidently uses the languages at his disposal, Latin and French. And those languages embody thought-forms, categories and conceptions of which he is likely to be not fully aware or to

take simply for granted, such as the Aristotelian conceptions of substance and attribute, and the Neo-Platonic conception of a cause, that it is that which generates a lesser likeness of itself, upon which he tacitly relies in his first proof of the existence of God. Like the rest of us, he can question, modify or discard particular words or uses of them and the categories and conceptions which they express. But he can do so only by tacitly and acritically relying upon others. To question all of them is impossible, for it would mean depriving oneself of all the means of articulate and complex thought, and questioning is very much an articulate and complex process of thinking. Hence even the doubter has generally to accept, implicitly, his intellectual situation and the bulk of what he has inherited in order explicitly to question and doubt some part of it.<sup>17</sup> The same applies to all those who have tried to reconstruct human knowledge upon some assured foundation, irrespective of the particular errors in their assumptions. We can never wholly transcend the intellectual milieu into which we have been born and reared, and knowing is always a hazardous task in which we are always liable to being mistaken in part but in which we can later correct some of our errors.

The modern world is awash with ideological schemes for the reconstruction of society and has paid a high price for some of them. But they never can achieve the clean slate from which they propose to start. Even in their theorising they inevitably incorporate inherited and tacit assumptions about man and the world, perhaps parts of a radical tradition that they simply take for granted, such as hostility to an exchange economy or to economic science itself, which reminds us that everything has its costs. Even more so in the implementation of any such scheme they cannot start with a clean slate because they are dealing with people who carry their pasts with them and not are malleable clay, cement, stone and metal. I saw this in the two years that I spent teaching in a College of Education in northern Nigeria. Formally, it was very similar to the one where I had been teaching in England from whence the design had been imported, but its actual operations were often very different, from administration to the styles of teaching and learning. Again, northern Europeans in public offices will tend to place the public good above family ties and shun nepotism, but Africans regard it as their duty to help poorer relations and so those in positions of responsibility will try to obtain for them employment in public services irrespective of their fitness for the job. A recent report in the newspaper showed that people in Britain, Holland and Switzerland are more likely to co-operate with each other and the law whereas people in Russia and Greece, where family ties are more valued, are more likely to disobey the law and seek revenge for injuries to their relations. Hence no matter what the planner plans, those for whom he plans will operate it in ways to which they are accustomed and for which they have the required practical knowledge, unless it is already adapted to suit them or there is some provision for genuine acculturation to it, and not just the presentation of ‘information’ which cannot tell one what to do with it, let alone arouse a desire to use it in appropriate ways. If imported machinery can fail to work even in similar conditions, then even more so are political and social systems liable to go awry when exported to states and societies with very different customs and attitudes.<sup>18</sup>

#### ***4. Le meilleur, c'est l'ennemi du bien***

Acceptance of one's situation entails acceptance of imperfections, including those in oneself. Polanyi's particular target is revolutionary attempts at a total renewal of society by means of unrestrained power, yet he also warns that any attempt to remove injustices overnight, rather than gradually, would replace them with yet worse ones.<sup>19</sup> What the modern mind seems reluctant to accept is that in this life most things are ‘double-valued’: that is, as well as their good attributes they also incur costs. Economics is the ‘dismal science’ precisely because that is what it teaches, particularly in respect of unintended consequences, usually untoward. This shows itself in an imbalance in attitudes towards the past, the present and the future. The past is neglected because of the refusal to learn what it can teach—in modern politics the wheel is constantly re-invented and ‘the gods of the

copy-book headings' are ignored, and either the present is sacrificed to a future that never arrives or the future is sacrificed in impatience for short-term shifts and enjoyment now. Doubtless such follies were committed in the past but today they seem to be more prevalent. One reason may be that genuine improvements in the conditions of life have bred a belief that most of its frustrations and disappointments could be removed, and that increases in the powers at our disposal, and especially at the disposal of governments, have led many to conclude that government action can remove all of them.

## **5. No Simple Rules**

Just as no art can be reduced to a set of explicit rules, so too is it vain to search for simple rules to guide public policy. In *On Liberty*, J.S. Mill himself could not keep to his one simple rule that only actions which affect others should be subject to legislation, for he had to admit that, although a man walking into danger might not thereby harm anyone else, he could and should be legitimately constrained from so doing because he would not wish to harm himself. In any case there is no such simple distinction between those actions which affect only oneself and those which affect others: every act is liable to affect others in some way and at some time. Likewise Bernard Bosanquet could not keep to his simple rules, that only those actions which are better done for the wrong motive than not done at all should be enjoined by law, and thus that state action should be limited to 'hindering hindrances' to a better life.<sup>20</sup> For his later endorsement of state help for study at university for those otherwise unable to undertake it, was a proposal for positive aid rather than an attempt to counter a definite obstacle. Both these are examples of constructivist, simplistic thinking which the better judgment of their authors forced them to abandon while pretending not to do so.

Abstract principles and the necessary and universal features of human life are necessarily embodied in local and historical institutions, customs, traditions, laws and ways of life. It follows that no code book of abstract rules can suffice to guide us, privately or publicly, through life and diverse problems, and that local custom must provide the 'matter' which the abstract form requires to become concrete. For example, a row is brewing in Oxford where the local mosque wants to broadcast the calls to prayer from loudspeakers but where the non-Moslem population doesn't want to be disturbed by them. Elsewhere militant atheists, tradition-loathing socialists and 'liberals', and some newly arrived townies in villages, combine to oppose the ringing of church bells, and so there are probably some in Oxford who would want both to prevent the Moslem call to prayer and to stop the ringing of church bells. How could Mill's simple rule resolve these disputes? Whose rights take precedence? Those who want silence no matter what the source? Those who want to continue a traditional practice? Those who want to introduce something new and not any part of English tradition? Who is going to be forced to remain silent or be made to hear something they do not wish to hear? On what abstract principle can any such question be decided? But local custom can in many cases. If what has long been practised has a prescriptive right to continue, then those who wish to stop it or those who wish to introduce something which annoys others, especially if the former are new-comers and the latter long-established residents, would have to give way until they have secured voluntary agreement all round. This is itself an abstract rule, but is one which indicates its own content in many particular cases. It also embodies the foundation of all law and government, namely, prescription.

## **6. Prescription**

All modern discussions of the basis of legitimacy and political obligation, from Hobbes onward, are beside the point for abstract principles cannot apply themselves, and the right to govern and to legislate is ultimately that

of prescription, established usage, in every case. For even a revolutionary regime, such as the Jacobins in France and the Bolsheviks in Russia, has to assume a right to govern that territory and that population already constituted as France and the French or Russia and the Russians. When, supposedly, France was being reconstructed anew in 1790, it was taken for granted that France already existed, that certain persons in Paris had the right to reconstruct it, and that their decisions were binding upon Charles in Cherbourg and Maurice in Marseilles. Even if a plebiscite had been held, it would have begged the questions of why Charles and Maurice should be obliged to accept the result and why just that set of persons and no others were given the chance to take part. The body politic is prior to any formal organisation of it or explicit constitution for it. One of the few wise decisions made and largely continued by the newly independent states in Africa has been to accept the boundaries laid down for them by the former colonial powers, even though there are, for example, Yorubas in neighbouring Benin as well as in the south-west of Nigeria and Hausas in Niger as well as in the north of Nigeria. It is a necessary presumption of all government that, on the whole, what is right simply because it is and has been. To start with a really clean slate would be arbitrary power at its most extreme. Whatever rearrangements a government may wish to make, it must start with what is already there and take it to be legitimate, for that is the ultimate basis of its own legitimacy.

## 7. Trust and Solidarity

Belief, faith, authority, trust—all these have little place in distinctively modern philosophy. For Cartesian doubt, critical philosophy and the recent ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ are based, not only on a sceptical reaction against excessive credulity with respect to others, their authority and what they say, but also on distrust in one’s own cognitive powers. Likewise all efforts to find ‘criteria’ for our judgments, sure foundations for our knowledge and purely ‘objective’ methods for extending it, are all motivated by the same distrust. Hence the conclusion that the knower can only infect his knowing with ‘subjectivism’ and so must be eliminated from it as much as possible. But this is all a mere pretence, as Descartes himself said,<sup>21</sup> and many modern philosophers do not, and cannot, live by what they profess to believe, and thus their philosophy is philosophy in bad faith. Sartre’s existentialism logically entails that it too is ‘bad faith’, for to write it Sartre had to presuppose that there are intellectual standards which he had not arbitrarily chosen which was contrary to his claim that we are condemned to choose everything we believe and do. Only a fiduciary and not any critical or foundational philosophy can be consistent with how we actually live and think and have to live and think, that is, on a basis of trust in ourselves and others. For it formulates the golden mean between credulity and scepticism which in real life we try, or should try, to attain. In contrast to belief as an inferior alternative to knowledge, mere belief, Polanyi seeks to reinstate the Augustinian conception of it as that which leads to and sustains knowledge and understanding.<sup>22</sup>

The social and political counterpart of this is general trust in and solidarity with others. Just as the republic of science is held together by networks of overlapping competences, so too society at large and the body politic are held together by overlapping relationships of trust.<sup>23</sup> Polanyi, starting from the example of natural science, focuses upon other cultural domains such as the arts and religion, and leadership in them by authoritative figures. Just as belief and trust in our own and others’ cognitive powers is the prerequisite for knowledge, so too is the fundamental and everyday trust that we have in each other and especially in each other’s honesty, veracity and willingness to help in difficulties, the prerequisite for all social life. Trust is prior to suspicion and distrust, as belief is prior to doubt and scepticism. It begins in infancy, in the trust that the child puts in his parents. Children who have been abused from an early age have had such feelings destroyed and so come to view everyone else with suspicion, while psychopaths lack feelings altogether and therefore any insight into others. Life teaches us all that not everyone can be trusted. But just as sceptical, critical, foundationalist and objectivist philosophers wrongly infer that because they have sometimes been mistaken they can always be mistaken, unless perhaps

they reconstruct their knowledge in another way, so too in life generally do some, having been gullible on some occasions, conclude that no one can be trusted. Even the state of mutual fear and suspicion that Stalin created rested on a belief that everyone else could be trusted, in a backhanded manner, to inform Stalin of any actions by others that might displease him.

Trust begins as trust in particular persons, firstly one's parents, and widens to other family members and neighbours. A general attitude of trust, necessary to any wider society where strangers are often encountered, can grow from trust in particular persons. Likewise the emotions of fellow-feeling and solidarity, also necessary to any group and society, start with what Burke called the 'little platoon'. One's family, locality, tribe, region, nation are all concrete and imaginable objects of love and loyalty, but not the 'humanity' that Rousseau pretended to love nor even the anonymous members of Hayek's 'Great Society', important though it is that persons from very different backgrounds should meet each other with common respect. Again, as Polanyi argued, all continuing pursuits and practices, such as the arts and sciences, not only require trust and shared interests among their participants but also from society at large, so that even the parties in literary or scientific disputes, in which accusations of charlatanism and fraud may be thrown back and forth, can contain their dispute within some wider and shared convictions from their cultural heritage and the general public can believe that most of them are saying things of importance.<sup>24</sup> From this Polanyi further argues that there are four coefficients of social organisation with their appropriate institutions: sharing of convictions, and institutions of culture; sharing of fellowship, and social intercourse, group rituals and common defence, fostering and demanding group loyalty; co-operation for joint material benefit, and an economic system; and the exercise of authority or coercion by public power to shelter and control the previous three.<sup>25</sup> But equally, the last also rests on the previous three: without the sharing of some common convictions, some solidarity and fellow-feeling, and some generation of wealth, governments are both more reliant on coercion and yet also gravely constrained and powerless. Indeed, without the first two, there is no genuine society at all. Even short-term contracts for limited purposes rest upon some degree of trust by at least one of the parties, as by Stalin in Hitler over the Soviet-Nazi Pact. Beyond that, contracts presuppose some general confidence in the making of promises, for the promise to perform what one has promised cannot be a part of the contract itself. And so, as Max Scheler argued, every contract presupposes some prior shared experience of mutual and spontaneous solidarity and fellow-feeling with others, though not necessarily within the same community as the other contracting party.<sup>26</sup>

But such particular loyalties and feelings, because they distinguish 'us' from 'them' and any 'us' may be indifferent or hostile to 'them', have become suspect in many eyes, precisely because they are local and particular and seem to be imposed upon us. Once again we are faced with the question of acceptance or rejection of the concrete situation in which we find ourselves. There are only two other possibilities: attachment to and solidarity with some abstract ideal and design or no attachments and solidarity at all. The first is ideological attachment: attachment to a mere principle or scheme and not to living persons, one's fellow kinsmen, tribesmen, countrymen, etc., and their shared traditions, memories and aspirations. The result is inevitably fanaticism, infatuation with an abstraction that can never be realised in concrete reality, and thus in revolutionary and dictatorial politics to bend recalcitrant reality to it, no matter that the end result may be supposed to be freedom. For example, Nozick's libertarian utopia is never going to be realised by the 'invisible hand' of the spontaneous mutual adjustment of individual and group actions and decisions. It is not so much that it is uninspiring, though it is in comparison with concrete and therefore historic entities, but that, insofar as it is inspiring, it can inspire only fanaticism.<sup>27</sup> As for no attachments and solidarity, that would be universal autism or psychopathology, a crowd of unrelated individuals with no ties one to another, not even of mother to child. Such a condition of humanity could perhaps come about, but it would be suicidal. None would spontaneously help any others, and

they would die off one by one with no posterity.

It follows that the only valid questions about local and particular attachments and solidarity are themselves concrete ones about how given societies, communities, groups and states be guided peaceably to live together. Sometimes a foreign and imperial and impartial power has been able to preserve the peace among groups that otherwise may have been in conflict. But even that requires some attachment of at least some in those groups to the imperial power, such as the locals recruited into a colonial civil service, police force and army. In other cases, only the dominance of one local group and its customs and culture can provide stability and order, with the others being more or less content to play subordinate roles. Indeed, there can be a society only when there is a common body of custom, law, language and mutual understanding, that is, a common culture of some sort which can create a basic consensus and solidarity. This is especially true in the modern world where participation in government of all the people is both possible and desired by them. Without a demos there can be no democracy, only the rule of a coercive majority, if that.<sup>28</sup> Whatever the abstract considerations may be, any policy likely to disrupt the common culture, consensus and solidarity, such as mass immigration of peoples with customs and attitudes very different from those of the local population, is fraught with danger. Likewise any aggressive imposition of a dominant language, culture and customs at the expense of established regional variations, and any aggressive assertion of the latter against the former. There can be no general plan suitable for all circumstances and occasions, only particular adjustments for particular times and places.

## **8. Beyond Politics: Modern Gnosticism**

In (3) above, reference was made to contemporary frustrations at our limitations even though our powers have vastly increased in the last two centuries. Somewhere in all this, it seems to me, is a general frustration with human limitations and a refusal to accept that there are some things that none of us can achieve. Behind this frustration, I suggest, lies a refusal to accept our finitude and createdness. Ultimately political problems cannot be solved by political means but are moral ones, ones of character and temperament, and they in turn rest upon our conceptions of and attitudes towards the world and our destiny within and beyond it.

In the later sections of *PK* Ch. 7, 'Conviviality', Polanyi seeks to explain how the magic of Marxism bewitches intellectuals with the moral appeal of its contempt for morality. I do not question any part of his account, but I think that there is more to be said and that it goes beyond Polanyi himself and even Eric Voegelin. For what we see in such as Rousseau, Marx and Heidegger in *Being and Time*, is a modern and secularist variation upon ancient Gnosticism. The latter held this physical universe to be the lowest level of the cosmos and intrinsically evil in being material and furthest from the Light. Human beings are sparks of that one and original Light which have fallen through successive 'aeons', each with its own ignorant and malign ruler, and have been encrusted with the evils peculiar to each aeon. By some means or other, certain persons receive revelations of the saving gnosis, the knowledge of what we really are, whence we have come and how we can return through the aeons, shedding our encrustations and returning to the one Light. Unlike the monistic trends in Hinduism, it was never explicitly stated that our final destiny would be reabsorption in the one Light, but that does appear to be the logic of the explicit teaching. I suggest that we find an exact but secularist and immanentist parallel in Rousseau, Marx and Heidegger, and the like, and that what they are ultimately reacting against and seeking release from is differentiation and finitude as such, from being this and not that. Rousseau and Marx find that release in a total and undifferentiated state in which free, pure spirits together resolve their differences and act as one, respectively, in the General Will and in the classless and purely socialist society, while Heidegger found his in the 'resolved

community’ of the Nazi Gemeinschaft.<sup>29</sup> In Sartre, we find an even more explicit statement of the entrapment of the pure and free spirit, the ‘nothingness’ and ‘fold in being’ that is condemned only and always to choose, in a world in which others ‘objectify’ him (i.e. make him determinate) with their gaze. But for Sartre there is *Huis Clos*, no exit, because humankind can never achieve the identity of *être en soi* and *être pour soi* which, if it were possible, would be God. A similar idea of the empty self has been found in analytic philosophy,<sup>30</sup> while reductionist sociologies, which make the person a dimensionless point at which roles and other social forces intersect, have exactly the same effect on those exposed to it—they come to feel themselves encrusted and defined by ‘society’, exactly as Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger and Sartre did, and wish to be free. But that freedom is an empty Gnostic freedom from created particularity which we never attain. Hence the widespread discomfort induced with one’s social situation, with all social roles, all allegiances and commitments, is ultimately a revolt against our cosmic situation. It results in an aimless and destructive fretting and discontent (*angst*), to be relieved by arbitrary commitment to some politically radical movement bent on ‘smashing the system’, which these days also takes the form of an alliance with radical Islam against Western civilisation, its proximate object of discontent.

Polanyi’s call that we accept the intellectual, cultural, historical, social and political situations in which we find ourselves and follow our callings to conduct ourselves responsibly in them, is also a plea for the virtue of patience in dealing with the problems of life which include our own limitations. Likewise, the acceptance of our cosmic situation as created and finite beings in a created and finite world requires also the virtue of humility, of acknowledging that we are not the creators and masters of the world and that we must ungrudgingly accept our subordinate status. And both require the virtue of hope to guard against the despair that we can achieve nothing and that life and effort are futile. But no merely political action can arouse the patience, humility and hope that responsible conduct, both political and non-political, requires.

## Endnotes

All references to Polanyi’s publications will be given with the usual abbreviations.

<sup>1</sup> Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, and London, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> *PK*, p. 323.

<sup>3</sup> *PK*, p. viii.

<sup>4</sup> *PK*, pp. 53-8.

<sup>5</sup> *PK*, p. 245.

<sup>6</sup> *PK*, p. 305.

<sup>7</sup> *PK*, p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> *PK*, p. 323.

<sup>9</sup> In Pt IV Polanyi elaborates the epistemology and ontological significance of his post-critical and personalist philosophy, especially with respect to tacit integration which most of his later publications further developed. Perhaps the wider philosophy has been somewhat neglected because of this. For a general survey of Polanyi and acceptance of one’s situation, see my ‘Michael Polanyi and acceptance of situation’, *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie*, Vol. 40, No.s 1-2, 1996, pp. 179-93.

<sup>10</sup> *PK*, p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> See *PK*, p. 213, and Ch. 6, §13, ‘Dwelling in and breaking out’.

<sup>12</sup> Positivism also is a rationalist construction, both in its original sense of Comte’s *a priori* scheme of human history and its termination, and in its general sense of denying *a priori* that there are universal and necessary features of human existence in the world and that we cannot live and think without a world-and-life-

view of some sort of other. Empiricism also was a rationalist construction, for it substituted for actual experience its own *a priori* construction of the mind as a passive recipient of unstructured and atomic ‘sensations’, ‘impressions’, ‘sense data’ and the like. Kant appears to have combined both empiricism and a more explicitly rationalist constructivism.

<sup>13</sup> See *SFS*, p. 83; *PK*, p. 244.

<sup>14</sup> On this, see Aurel Kolnai, *The Utopian Mind and Other Papers*, ed. F.N. Dunlop, London, Athlone Press, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Trans. Huntingdon, Cambridge, CUP, 1957; see *PK*, p. 213n.

<sup>16</sup> See *PK*, Ch. 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Sovereignty*, pp. 228-30.

<sup>18</sup> *PK*, pp. 52 and 53-4.

<sup>19</sup> *PK*, p. 245. Cf. Burke: ‘He censures God who quarrels with the imperfections of man’, Speech at Bristol before the Election, 1780, in *Works*, London, Rivington, 1826-7, Vol. III, p. 359.

<sup>20</sup> *The Philosophical Theory of the State* (London Macmillan, 1899, 4th ed. 1923) pp. 177ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Discourses on Method*, 1. Descartes proposed, in the meantime, not to doubt his moral beliefs and others necessary for living.

<sup>22</sup> *PK*, p. 266.

<sup>23</sup> *PK*, pp 216-24.

<sup>24</sup> *PK*, pp. 137, 203, 215, 220-2.

<sup>25</sup> *PK*, pp. 212-3.

<sup>26</sup> *The Nature of Sympathy* (trans. Heath, London, Routledge, 1954 ), Pt 3, Ch. 3. On the limits of contract generally, see my *Beyond Liberalism*, pp. 173-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1974, p. 297. Cf. Polanyi on Popper’s ‘open society’: ‘A wholly open society would be a wholly vacuous one—one which could never actually exist since it could never have any reason for existing’ (*M* p. 184).

<sup>28</sup> cf. *PK*, pp. 215, 221, 223.

<sup>29</sup> See the Epilogue, ‘Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism’, in Hans Jonas’ *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, Mass, 2nd ed. 1963.

<sup>30</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London, Routledge, 1970.

## Electronic Discussion List

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group that explores implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. Anyone interested can join. To join yourself, go to the following address: [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/polanyi\\_list/join](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/polanyi_list/join). If you have difficulty, send an e-mail to Doug Masini (masini@etsu.edu) and someone will see that you are added to the list.