

# From Morality to Spirituality: Society, Religion and Transformation

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**ABSTRACT** Key Words: postcritical epistemology, emergentism, teleology, emergentist ethics, moral philosophy, religion, spirituality, metaphysics, aesthetics, mysticism, God.

*In a Polanyian emergentist ethics, moral ways of being and their concomitant interpretive structures come as achievements in response to a heuristic in the human condition. Religious transformation, as seen in mysticism and enlightenment, however, may present a radical, “transnatural” solution of a different order. Polanyi’s understanding of “breaking out” from conceptual frameworks, and his conception that Christian worship promotes a sustained hopeful anguish, are contrasted with a Polanyian “breaking in” to a new framework of knowing and being that provides a happy solution to human suffering. With a new framework, a new spirit, or center, is seen through that provides a different experience of the world. Polanyi’s conceptions of a telic organizing principle, breaking out, and breaking in provide three different conceptions of God.*

This paper is the third and final installment of a series of papers titled “From Science to Spirituality.” The entire project is geared to applying Michael Polanyi’s insights on tacit knowing and emergent being to the field of morality, with an expansion to see how this picture may also be used to understand spiritual transformation. In papers one and two, as well as showing its strong ties to virtue ethics, I broadly showed how deontological, consequentialist, sentimentalist and intuitionist insights fit together in an emergentist ethics that is sensitive to the role of tacit knowing, the from-to structure of consciousness, and the process of discovery. Now in paper three, I will venture beyond societal and religious ethics to sort out how Polanyi himself understood spiritual transformation and how it might be better understood given Polanyi’s own epistemology and ontology.

The first paper provided a postcritical understanding of morality by dealing with the puzzle presented by the dissonance between the spirit and the letter of the moral law. The second paper showed how morality can present an emergent reality by dealing with the puzzle of why we should practice virtue for itself. This third paper looks at those same puzzles from a different perspective, and also deals with the puzzle of whether spiritual transformation is in fact a further emergent development that requires new tacit structures, or whether it is a return to some unpoluted original experience of the world.

Paper one showed strong ties between a postcritical and an Aristotelian ethic. Paper two began to show a divergence from an Aristotelian view with the notion of a discontinuity, i.e., a logical gap, that must be crossed in advancing from novice to expert. Paper three will see several more divergences from Aristotle: first, in the possibility of a plurality of moral systems; second, in the notion that happiness can come from the complete disruption of a virtuous life, as one shifts from a moral to spiritual mode of being; and third, in the notion that the advance of human beings may be *telic*, rather than drawn forward by an ultimate teleological end. Conceptualizations regarding being *drawn forward* to a higher goal, *breaking in* to a new tacit structure, and *breaking out* of conceptual frameworks will bring several candidates for referents to the word “God.”

## I. Drawn Forward: Following the Spirit *Rather Than* the Law

In “From Science to Morality,” I discussed two main ways the explicit law differs from the spirit of the law. One concerned method, the other concerned content. Following laws provided a training that brings one the proper background that one needs to experience the way of being of the moral virtuoso. The laws were also an incomplete explicit expression of that way of being, which was the objectively best way to be and act, given the nature of people and the community they participate in.

The moral virtuoso is free from rules in the way a piano virtuoso has mastered all the classical techniques and yet can break the rules in the right way to achieve beautiful results unimaginable to the novice. The master attains a new freedom and lives spontaneously out of the spirit rather than the letter of the law. But there are more conservative and more radical ways by which to conceive this transcending of the rules. Aristotle’s way of conceiving moral excellence is the more conservative view. But Polanyi’s conception of emergence and his notion of a logical gap allow for a much more radical—and yet at the same time more humble—view of transcendence. It is radical in allowing for a plurality of natural goals and introducing a notion of conversion; it is humble in acknowledging the possibility that we may not be capable of achieving or even determining an ultimate *telos*. Whereas “From Science to Morality” focused upon a *tension* between the letter of the law and its spirit, here in “From Morality to Spirituality” the focus will be on two ways in which there can be sharper *divisions* between the spirit and the law, as we examine various possible ways of being human, both natural and “transnatural.”

### 1. *The Multiplicity of Frameworks and Conversion*

For Aristotle, there is one set of first principles and one interpretive framework by which we should live in moral excellence. *Phronesis* is required to unveil, understand and properly apply these principles, and the virtuous person who lives masterfully can follow his instincts rather than any set of rules. One’s sentiments and intuitions are trained in such a way that they indicate the right moral action irrespective of the rule, which may be wrong when the feeling is right. Here, acting out of the spirit rather than the letter of the law involves having the practical wisdom to know when the law does not bluntly apply to a particular situation; it involves the freedom that comes with doing the right thing spontaneously—and the happiness that comes with being the sort of person who performs virtuous activities naturally and willingly.

For Polanyi, as with Aristotle, there is this conservative sense of mastery. When Polanyi talks about how the skill of the expert is not reducible to rules, he still talks about “dwelling in” the rules. Here we are still in the framework where the goals of the rules and their meaning may be similar for the novice as they are for the master, but the master has the tacit coefficients that allow for a better understanding and expertise. Already, however, Polanyi’s structures of tacit knowing, emergent being, and discovery allow for a more radical approach than Aristotle’s. For Aristotle, the conditions that are necessary for happiness must be linearly acquired (and have one recourse for fulfillment), but for Polanyi these conditions can be drawn into place holistically (and may be fulfilled in different ways).

For example, having the right upbringing is essential for Aristotle in a way that it is not for Polanyi. For Aristotle, one might say, the higher level of understanding is built cumulatively on subsidiary experience. But for Polanyi, the focal goal can effect a complete re-organization of the subsidiaries in its service. This may entail qualitative rather than merely quantitative and structural changes. Something new is then added to our subsidiary

awareness that was not there before. The subsidiary ground is set in concrete for Aristotle; it is malleable in the service of a vision for Polanyi. Whereas for Aristotle, someone who is raised outside of the *polis* has no chance of achieving moral excellence, for Polanyi, having a bad start does not insure failure, since we can cross logical gaps through heuristic striving. Those seeking moral excellence might then be capable of achieving it in spite of deficiencies such as not being born into the best sort of life under good laws. A barbarian might immigrate to the *polis*, partake in its tradition, acquire the right experiences, follow the right sort of exemplar, and graduate to its way of being virtuous.<sup>1</sup>

Polanyi's way of conceiving clues and their integration thus allows for the possibility of a *conversion* to a new way of being. Since tacit integration is not aggregative but involves a gestalt, shifting to a different moral interpretive framework is likely to bring a complete reevaluation of one's existing knowledge and a different way of experiencing the world in the light of new meanings. Effecting this shift opens one up to as yet unforeseen possibilities, just as genuine discoveries that connect with reality tend to do for Polanyi (*PK*, 201). Advancing to a different understanding of the rules might then be transcending them in a more radical way than in the conservative, cumulative approach. Here, by following the spirit rather than the letter of the law, the law would embody a *different* spirit than one could previously imagine.

As there are radical shifts in interpretive frameworks in science, so there are discoveries of new frameworks in morality, i.e., discoveries of new ways of being. In a radical transformation, even if all the explicit formulations of the rules were kept, they could be interpreted in a radically different way. But even radical transformations can be hidden by the necessity of keeping the same general vocabulary of explicit signs (e.g., "all men are to be treated as equal"<sup>2</sup>). The shift in framework can thus be subtle enough to be covert; old words and rules are given new meanings, and this ambiguity promotes the conservative, cumulative view Aristotle espouses.<sup>3</sup>

Advances towards new ways of being are responses to questions that arise from and are rooted in our biology, our common human condition, and our cultural heritage. Thus the structure of knowing and discovery that Polanyi presents seems to suggest that there is not simply one interpretive framework that is understood and practiced differently by different people with lesser or greater degrees of success, but there is a plurality of possible ways to authentically proceed. In the context of morality, different fundamental questions might produce different ways of being moral with equal claim to the good. But they would have an equal claim, of course, only if it were possible to gain an impersonal metaperspective.

## ***2. Plurality, Hierarchy and Teleology***

Aristotle provides a hierarchy of being that moves from pure potency at its lowest level to pure act at its highest level, but for Aristotle the species and their *telê* in this structure are considered fixed eternally and there is one right way to be for each. Concomitantly for Aristotle, in the realm of moral discovery there is a linear progress in the inquiry that leads to the unveiling of moral principles.<sup>4</sup> So for Aristotle both our biology and our morality are set to a fixed *telos*.

Polanyi does acknowledge the movement from potentiality to actualization in the evolution from inanimate matter to life and on to consciousness, but the biology and metaphysics that underwrites Aristotle's notion of a fixed universe with an ultimate *telos* must be revised. These revisions bring significant changes in how we understand the ontic, epistemic and moral orders. The notion of moral emergence—the graduation to

new ways of being—can fit well with Aristotle’s conception of a stratified reality, but does the plurality and dynamism that Polanyi allows make obsolete the sort of hierarchy that Aristotle espouses, with its notions of better and worse, its fixed structure, and its unified end? We will see here that Polanyi’s emergentist ethics does espouse a moral hierarchy and, although it allows for diversity, it also intimates some unified trajectory for the development of humankind. Looking at Polanyi’s conception of biological evolution will give us a handle on the possibilities and limits of a moral evolution.

Polanyi’s notion of emergence provides a hierarchy of being, beginning from inanimate matter, to life, to animals, to man and on to human responsibility. Higher levels emerge as an integrative gestalt that can turn round and control boundary conditions left open at a lower level (*KB*, 154). Polanyi sees no reason to believe that this evolution has come to an end, and he repudiates our ability to know any final natural ends to this process. As Richard Gelwick explains in “Michael Polanyi’s Daring Epistemology and the Hunger for Teleology,” although there is no final pre-ordained *telos* discernable for the hierarchy of being, Polanyi does see what has been called a “telic” or “telenomic” structure to the development of being (Gelwick, *Zygon*, 40:1, 65) that has a counterpart in the advance of our knowing. The notion of a telic structure, derived from the study of biology, brings in purposiveness without bringing in the theological or metaphysical implications of a final cause or goal (Gelwick, 66-67).

For Polanyi, emergence takes place in the context of a “generalized field” (*PK*, 398) or “organizing field” (*KB*, 219) that provides a “gradient of potentiality” (*PK*, 398). Biological systems evolve by being drawn along a gradient of potential to an actualization of particular possibilities that are inherent in a system. “It is a fundamental property of open systems . . . that they stabilize any improbable event which serves to illicit them” (*PK*, 384). This pattern of biological development persists in psychology as we make discoveries about ourselves and reality. Our structures of knowing are drawn to reality, even as we might chase after new emergent realities. Polanyi associates the “mental unease that seeks appeasement” of a question with a “field of forces” that has a “gradient of potentiality” (*PK*, 398; *Meaning*, 176). What was a “chance fluctuation” in nature “releases the action of certain self-sustaining operational principles” (*PK*, 394). What was the unease of a question felt at a deep existential level can become a solution consolidated in a new way of being. This potentiality provides a direction towards which our being or knowing is naturally drawn. It provides a forward focal point that is holistically orchestrated from current conditions. Towards such points we may have our anticipatory intuitions, but just as the apprentice cannot understand the master, there is no assured way of properly predicting or understanding these approaching landmarks from where we are now.

Polanyi’s structure of knowing and discovery and the indeterminate nature of being suggest that there is not simply one correct interpretive framework that is understood and practiced differently by different people; there can be multiple interpretive frameworks incommensurate with each other, each of which may grasp reality in different ways. As Gelwick states, telic structures are “purposive but not predetermined” (68). Free societies are free to responsibly develop in different directions. “Polanyi’s view of reality is essentially creative . . . any philosophical view that denies the freedom of inquiry and of expression to the individual or to the destiny of a society or culture is contrary to Polanyi’s basic standards” (Gelwick, 69). So it remains a possibility that different ontic and heuristic fields may advance in several different directions simultaneously.

But this does not lead to an ontological nor moral relativism for Polanyi, since he has a notion of one reality, one truth and a progress in science that is transferable to morality. One cannot be a responsible human being and a relativist for Polanyi. In spite of any direct incommensurability, a scientist can judge with universal

intent that one interpretive framework catches reality better than another, and she is compelled to commit herself to that framework. Similarly, in the context of morality, one can judge the superiority of one way of being over another with that same universal intent.

The shift to a new paradigm in science might be said to be “better” for explanatory reasons, but can we really say that one way of being is morally better than another? Certainly *within* a moral tradition we can rank-order actions, but how about when competing traditions have different paradigms or when a new paradigm arises within an existing tradition of inquiry? It may seem impossible to distinguish better from worse, higher from lower, especially when a paradigm is intrinsically tied together with a way of being, as it is when we rank order animals above plants, or some human moral systems above others.

We could attempt a value neutral discussion in terms of complexity. Complex systems, biological or social, might be better in that they provide more opportunities for success and reward. They also present greater hazards since there are more opportunities for failure. But the *quality* of the successes and rewards are even more important than the number. So, with regard to human fulfillment, complexity and number alone do not provide adequate measure; quality is also something that must be judged. As John Stuart Mill said,

It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they know only their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.<sup>5</sup>

There can be no absolute, explicit standard of proof recommending one system over another, but there is a standard set by personal knowledge. As Mill suggests in the context of judging between higher and lower pleasures, the best and most responsible judge is the person who is capable of experiencing and appreciating both. A person capable of dwelling in both competing frameworks would be in the best position to judge with universal intent which moral framework provides a better answer and a better way to be. Such a person could testify as a reliable witness to a valuable opportunity.

When Polanyi discusses ontological levels, “higher” clearly also means better in terms of quality and not merely complexity. Through evolution, systems are eventually drawn forward toward higher levels quality. There is a gradient of potentiality, an “organizing field,” pulling matter forward toward intelligent and responsible life, and there is also a “heuristic field” (*PK*, 403) present in intelligent, responsible human life that evokes for us both better ways of understanding and better ways of being.

Polanyi presents a picture in which we are drawn forward to become more than we are and to discover more than we know. But Polanyi also affirms that “true knowledge bears on an essentially indeterminate reality” (*KB*, 155). Moral excellence is therefore a precarious achievement recognized by those who are committed to its values. “For human greatness can be recognized only by submission to it and thus belongs to the family of things which exist only for those committed to them” (*PK*, 380). Otherwise put, “truth, beauty or justice... are things which can be apprehended only in serving them” (*PK*, 279).

In the pattern of evolutionary achievement, Polanyi sees that one can postulate organizing principles that bring about the emergent change and lead to the stabilization of new systems. Here Polanyi raises the question of whether these are deterministic, efficient principles *a la* LaPlace, which preordain nature’s end in the first cosmic gases, or whether there is a teleological final cause, *a la* Aristotle, which guides by a “continuous

intensification” of its “external creative agency” (*PK*, 395). The former coheres well with an understanding of science that postulates nothing supernatural; the later coheres well with the notions of field, freedom and responsibility. Polanyi attempts to resolve the dilemma by introducing a notion of a “maturation” by means of an organizing principle (*PK*, 395-396), which, as far as science can surmise, is telic and finite rather than ultimate and eternal.

The project of scientism to chart a complete reduction of all beings to lifeless simples and deterministic laws is foiled in Polanyi’s conception of emergence—we must postulate higher-order ordering and telic structures—but this does not thwart a scientist’s ability to identify and study subsidiary mechanisms, nor does it leap to a finalistic, teleological end as an all-encompassing solution to the emergence of life and consciousness: “though biotic achievements are said to be unspicifiable, we do claim the capacity for identifying and appraising them; nor is their scope unlimited or the range of their resourcefulness unbounded” (*PK*, 399). Though Polanyi recognizes that we know more than we can say, he is also careful here not to say more than we can know.

### ***3. Society, Religion and Transformation: Two Further Senses of Spirit vs. Law***

For Polanyi, in contrast to Aristotle, we may be evolving without a fixed final *telos*, and the creation or discovery of a higher level or principle is not merely a gradient of increase in the same rational framework; it can provide a meaning that effects a complete re-evaluation of all that precedes it. Two further senses of “law” rather than “spirit” derive from the plurality of natural goals and from the possibility of goals that push beyond the bounds of what we currently understand as natural.

As we have seen, Polanyi’s emergent ontology and tacit epistemology open up to a much more pluralistic view than Aristotle could entertain. The moral master’s way of being embodies the answers to the heuristic passion of a community. Since there are different subsets of society, there may be different moral masters within it. With a broad brush, one can see the difference between secular and religious morality as different types of interpretive frameworks with much overlap. Each framework has structural support in a community that engages in practices and obeys laws that carry its way of being. Each has its exemplars of the best way of being: there is the model citizen engaging in public life and there is the religious saint, or a more advanced practitioner, who is perhaps enrolled in a holy order.

When less division occurs between church and state, as in Aristotle’s culture, there is perhaps more common support for a unified moral framework with its experienced expert exhibiting its unified ideal way of being. When more division occurs, then following the “spirit”—understood as mastering a religious interpretive framework—rather than the “law”—understood as civic, secular law—can cause a larger divergence, and can create a choice between following the spirit in defiance of the law, or vice versa. This sense of spirit vs. law finds its source in conflicts between two different general sorts of interpretive moral frameworks that emphasize different questions and demand different levels of engagement.

Mystical experience or the experience of enlightenment provides for a much stronger sense for “following the spirit *rather than* the law.” Here one may break out of the human condition and natural goals into a new way of being which transcends good and evil as it is typically conceived in both religious and civic moralities. The mystic transcends, reinterprets or rejects the bulk of common cultural funds of law in order to follow the spirit and moves beyond most—and perhaps all—interpretive frameworks by which judgments are made. This prospect can present great dangers for both secular and religious traditions and cultural norms. Following

this spirit might break any common rational guidelines for action. As Kierkegaard points out, the knight of faith who is following the spirit rather than the ethical law can seem not only irrational but absurd. In *Fear and Trembling*, he provides the example of Abraham, who was willing to kill his only son to obey the higher decree of God. But in following the spirit of God, mystics such as Simone Weil and Meister Eckhart will speak of the spirit of divine love. The actions that are spontaneously called forth in this way of being would be actions consistent with a higher law of love. They would transcend our notions of good and evil, but would ultimately issue in actions that we, as novices, are likely to call good.

Polanyi also saw the advance into a religious spirit as an achievement of richer meanings and put it on a higher level of his hierarchy than scientific knowing (*Meaning*, 180; Clark, *TAD* 32:2 [2005-06], 30). Religion presents a meaningful experience of the world that is an opportunity for human development. How Polanyi conceived of religion, however, is vague and open to dispute (see, Clark's discussion, 25-36). In the next section, "From Suffering to Enlightenment," I will present the possibility that mystical experience is a religious achievement that bears a structure similar to the moral systems we have discussed so far, but that it opens up to a new order of satisfying answers to perennial questions—it may therefore present a telic advance that we are being drawn towards. Polanyi himself, however, related mystical experience to a momentary liminal awareness created after one breaks out from one system of human meaning and before indwelling a new system. Hence it is indeed a different order of experience—and also a telic advance, but not because it provides a better, more comprehensive solution, but because it undercuts all solutions rendered by ordinary meaning formation. For Polanyi, spiritual transformation is not a type of discovery similar to those in science, craft and morality, which break through into a new comprehensive integration of knowing and being; it is a break out of such integrations. What follows is therefore a Polanyian view, but it is not Polanyi's view. Polanyi's own view will be contrasted in a section III.

## **II. Breaking in: From Suffering to Enlightenment**

Polanyi espouses a notion of higher and lower in both being and in understanding that is recognized and affirmed only in an interpretive framework capable of grasping those higher levels. There is progress in advancing from one system and its questions, to a system that dissolves or answers those questions. But progress in being is no longer necessarily assured by an ultimate causal *telos*, and progress in understanding is no longer certified by an impersonal frame of reference.

In spite of the various goals different religions and social moral orders may provide, the notion of telic advance does permit the notion of a step to a new level of being that we are drawn forward toward out of the field of our common human condition. The experience of spiritual enlightenment might then present such a level. Because of the magnitude of the logical gap involved in such a transformation, steps towards this level are perhaps faltering. But this sort of achievement appears to have been scouted by religious exemplars and may be the source of those religious structures that seek to support transformations to an enlightened way of being. These traditions can present methodologies for experiencing the same sort of transformation that the mystic who originated the tradition first experienced. This path from the human condition to a spiritual enlightenment appears to break us out of our everyday experience and breaks into an experience of the divine, or rather, it transforms our everyday experience into an experience of the divine.

## *1. Breaking Out of the Human Condition*

The fundamental human experience that appears to open up to this illumination is the problem of human suffering asked at a visceral and personal level. Siddhartha Gautama, for example, questioned the existence of suffering and death, and his heuristic passion drove him on to his answer in a transformative experience of enlightenment. Once he achieved this new way of being and its framework for understanding, he became the compassionate Buddha and the entire aspect of the world changed from sorrow and despair to joy; all his experience with suffering was redeemed with new meaning.

Another path to a happiness that overcomes suffering is called the “way of the cross” in Christian mystic tradition. This path to a new way of being can exist outside conventional cultural bounds, and so generally moves away from society’s support for its sustenance.<sup>6</sup> Through great suffering, one can come to enlightenment. But this is absurd from the perspective of most cultural or societal moral traditions. Aristotle, for example, rejects this “way of the cross” as a way to happiness. When he discusses the necessity of having some external goods for happiness, he says,

Some maintain, on the contrary, that we are happy when we are broken on the wheel, or fall into terrible misfortunes, provided that we are still good. Whether they mean to or not, these people are talking nonsense (*NE*, 1153b 19-20).

So foreign to Aristotle’s moral interpretive framework was this conception of happiness that he recognized that the word might not hold the same meaning for those who claimed to be made “happy” by such devastating torments. But one can see how old integrations—beliefs and meanings surrounding the person—can be disrupted by such experiences. Desires and aversions, constructed from infancy, dissolve. The ego, which is used as the principal focal lens through which the world is seen, becomes shattered. A new integration and answer to the question of human suffering takes its place. For the mystic, the integrating lens of the ego is completely disrupted and, if “we are still good” and not thrown into bitter resentment by our misfortunes, the new focal integration that one looks at the world *through* is described as God or an experience of love. The feeling integral to this new egoless way of being, free from attachment to egoistic desires, is a joy or happiness beyond ordinary conception, and the words in our vocabulary used to describe and express it are seen as inadequate.

The sort of apprenticeship typically involved here seems to violate the normal progression one sees from apprentice to expert. One does not merely practice the rules, as a pianist does, until the rules no longer constrain, but free one to perform masterfully and break the rules. The practice itself is often a radical deconstruction of meaning, a *via negativa*, in which one’s reason is confounded by paradox and mystery. The structure, however, is similar to that which Polanyi describes for the process of discovery; meaningful experience in the end is reclaimed, but the depth at which it first strikes down our normally constructed meanings for ego and world is profound, even to the point of altering our cognitive perception of the world.

Such a transformed way of being may answer pervasive and deep questions about the best way to live. We recognize an enlightened moral master as happy and blessed, though not in a way we understand, and we may be called to seek apprenticeship to his or her wisdom. This calling is perhaps a telic effect of our sharing in the questions of the master and having an anticipatory awareness that this way of being can provide the answers that we seek.

## 2. *The Law of Love and Compassion*

Two moral masters of this genre might be the Buddha and Jesus. In apprenticing oneself to them, by imitating their actions and by following the teachings expressed in their explicit sayings, one might hope to have a similar sort of transformation to a new way of being that overcomes suffering and provides happiness. The paths to enlightenment or salvation that sprung from these masters emphasize the practice of virtues, but not quite the same catalogue of virtues that Aristotle recommended. The saint is humble and selfless, and is not Aristotle's magnanimous personality. The Eightfold Noble Path and the Sermon on the Mount encourage virtuous behavior, and a new set of rules can be garnered from them, as attention is directed toward transformative power of compassion and love.

In Pauline theology there is the eschatological notion that the shift from the Old Testament to the New began a transformation in which the spirit of God broke into human history in a new way with the result that the spirit *rather than* the law should be followed.<sup>7</sup> What was appropriate for one stage in the salvific history of humanity was no longer appropriate for a transformed way of being. Living out of the spirit now meant that laws could be transcended and ultimately there was only one law, as Saint Augustine formulated it later: "Love, and do what you will."<sup>8</sup>

To achieve, or be graced with, this spiritual transformation and to follow the living spirit was to do more than dwell in any particular set of religious or civic laws. Spiritual transformation of this order—that allows one to live out of this love—may be a precarious achievement that still requires more exemplars and more articulate structures in place to more widely sustain it, so that this love may transform not merely the occasional individual sporadically, but humanity at large.

## 3. *Religions and the Religious Spirit*

In part two of this series, "Morality: Emergentist Ethics and Virtue *For Itself*," I enlisted Polanyi's from-to structure of tacit knowing and the emergence of a discovery to show how doing what the good person does, without a further objective implied by one's current interpretive understanding, could open one up to the sort of reconstitution required to achieve the way of being of the moral virtuoso. I thus contend that the religions that flower from the example and teachings of enlightened religious innovators are originally meant to bring us to a place where we can dwell in the way of being of the innovator, who lived out of this experience of love in response to fundamental questions regarding how we should *be* in the world. There are undoubtedly many varieties of religious experience and many sources of and purposes for religions. What I am stressing here as spiritual transformation is the mystical enlightenment or awakening that is a theme common to many religious and philosophic traditions. Plato discussed an ascent to an experience of the Good, and a release from material desires; Hinduism has the notion of *moksha* or release, and the identification of the individual soul with Brahman; Buddhism sees the end of suffering and the achievement of Nirvana through the elimination of grasping; Christianity has the conception of the beatific vision, and the submission of the individual will to the will of God; and the Sufi tradition of Islam aims for a unity with the Friend, who becomes the air to our whistling reed.

The same structure of discovery that Polanyi outlines and that we have seen at work in the development of moral systems also seems at work in these experiences. There is a dissolution of clues as one struggles with deeper questions and a re-formation to a new comprehensive focus that provides the unspecifiable context for the solution. The ego and its will are dissolved and consciousness comes to experience a unity with a center

beyond itself and perceives this experience as the ultimate happiness. The world is then seen through this new joint comprehension, in a way similar to the way we look at particulars through concepts, or facts through paradigms. The ambient feeling of this way of being in the world is happy and the actions generated are generous and compassionate.

Religions seem to have this core religious experience at the base of their practices and rules, stressed to greater or lesser degrees, but there is reason to be cautious of saying that there is one sort of spiritual transformation. This order of experience comes in different flavors, is understood in different ways, and is supported to greater and lesser extents by a variety of religious communities.<sup>9</sup> There are common aspects, but by dwelling in different systems and practices one might expect the new joint comprehension to be different as well. Also, since some practices and rules are born from the *conception* of the good rather than living through an experience of the good, there is reason for caution in the generalization from one form of mystical experience to a religion and back again. Religions tend to become vehicles of socialization rather than transformation. The morality of religions tends toward a version of spiritual transformation made safe for society, with only glimpses of the radical transformations experienced by its exemplar. And even when a religion clearly provides a way to this sort of transformation, one can practice religion as a system of rules and never achieve the religious or spiritual transformation that it could foster.

The goal of practicing morality is similar in both spiritual transformation and in the shift to a new social or religious morality: one imitates to become like the exemplar, and the process of discovery—from imitation and moral behavior fostered by law, to conversion and mastery—is the same, but the order of the change, witnessed by the intensity of the mystic vision, seems to be different. Though there is doubtless much overlap, I therefore want to maintain a distinction between this religious or spiritual transformation, and its religious spirit, on the one hand and societal and religious morality and its spirit on the other.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Polanyi's understanding of mystical experience will give us stronger reason to divide social and religious morality from genuine religious experience. But although Polanyi discusses the sort of happy unity with God or cosmos that the enlightened mystic can achieve, he appears doubtful that this sort of experience can be generated or sustained by Christian worship and practices.

### **III. Breaking Out: A New Experience of Being**

In our knowing, we create structures of meaning that allow us to understand and experience being. These structures are joint comprehensions from tacit clues, and these comprehensions can connect us with comprehensive entities that exist in reality. Our joint comprehensions to a focal meaning or a unified entity can be an integration of incompatible elements. Some of these Polanyi describes as sustainable in a “natural” manner and are not achievements that require a continued effort to maintain, for example, the unity of two discrete images in binocular vision. Other integrations are achievements that do require a special effort. These integrations are not natural for us, though they may still reveal something that is independently real, and there is also the possibility that some may become more natural with the placement of more supporting structure. These integrations Polanyi calls “transnatural” (*Meaning*, 125). The achievement of the experience of God by mystics is then a transnatural integration of the incompatible elements of the universe and human living into a unified whole bearing meaning, i.e., a cosmos (*PK*, 198).

The spirit of love as witnessed in the lives of mystic saints might then display a transnatural, if not supernatural, source of religious motivation, which, in some flavors, encourages communal living with an

emphasis on manifesting the love of God, i.e., the reality revealed by the joint comprehension of clues. But according to Polanyi's epistemology and ontology, in achieving this transformation we might not be operating out of the love of an *infinite* creator, but out of a point of integration beyond our particular activities, i.e., an emergent transhuman reality revealed by a transnatural effort.

Polanyi's own epistemological theory and its application to science, crafts and morality would seem to indicate that a new interpretative structure is created through the pursuit of answers to questions. This, however, does not appear to be Polanyi's own view of religious and spiritual traditions. Apparently, Polanyi's view is that there is no *new* structure created in the experience of God, but that the ordinary structures of our human design are momentarily thwarted. Also, he suggests that the solution of the mystic, which I have described as the communion of consciousness with a point beyond the ego, does not bring about a *happy* solution to the problems guiding the heuristic endeavor wrought by the human condition (*Meaning*, 180). Following the path set by some religious innovators, including the Christian path Polanyi explicitly embraced, ultimately does not bring blessed happiness but hopeful anguish (*PK*, 198).

### ***1. Mysticism and Breaking Out***

Consistent with the picture I have painted above and in section II, Polanyi looks at God as "the focal point that fuses into meaning all the incompatibles in the practice of religion" (*Meaning*, 156). Polanyi discusses the mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius and the *via negativa* as a way to an experience of God and says this way "invites us, through a succession of 'detachments', to seek in absolute ignorance union with Him who is beyond all being and beyond all knowledge."<sup>11</sup> Through detachment, the Christian mystic comes to see things then not focally, but as part of a cosmos, as features of God" (*PK*, 197-8).

So Polanyi here posits that the experience of God is a way of experiencing the world as clues to an unknown, unknowable joint focus and, at the same time, each of those clues radiate with a new significance provided by the integration they bear upon. As stated above, and consistent with Polanyi's recourse to telic rather than teleological causes, this new center of experience might not be infinite and all-powerful. Polanyi here may be indulging the mystic's beliefs about her own experience, since "God" here is not referring to a transnatural, finite center drawing us forward into a new way of being, but to the ultimate, infinite joint comprehension of all being.

But here is where Polanyi's understanding of what happens in mystic and religious experience becomes ambiguous. Polanyi's talk of "cosmos" seems to put the mystic's discovery in Polanyi's typical ontic and epistemological structure, in which the achievement of the Christian mystic's experience is a new integration of tacit clues, but Polanyi frames this discussion in the context of "breaking out." The mystic's experience is thus seen as a variety of an experience that takes place *after* one's old interpretive framework has disintegrated in the face of an important question but *before* a new framework is dwelled in. It is an experience of *breaking out* that comes before a new *breaking in*.

In the usual process of discovery in science, one breaks out from one framework in which the contents of the mind are constrained and understood, and breaks into another "more rigorous and comprehensive" framework. This happens in the way one might shift from seeing a rabbit to a duck in the classic illustration of a gestalt switch. But somewhere in between, after "bursting the bounds of disciplined thought" there is "an intense if transient moment of heuristic vision." Polanyi speculates that while the mind is breaking out, and before

it has broken in “the mind is for the moment directly experiencing its content rather than controlling it by the use of any pre-established modes of interpretation: it is overwhelmed by its own passionate activity” (*PK*, 196).

What we experience briefly, even accidentally, in the process of discovery, the mystic aims for deliberately. Access via a *via negativa* would seem to indicate that this experience of the universe is available only with the radical breakdown of all humanly developed meaning structures; a comprehensive disruption of all our meanings.<sup>12</sup> Mystical experience for Polanyi thus comes to be an experience of the universe as it is *in itself* without any of our habitual constructions from clues to focal meanings in play, or at least not those normally engaged in the process of “observation and manipulation,” both of which, according to Polanyi, take up objects in the service of a further focal meaning (*PK*, 197).<sup>13</sup>

For Polanyi, “mysticism...breaks through the screen of objectivity and draws on our pre-conceptual capacities of contemplative vision” (*PK*, 199). This is an experience of things without their playing a role as subsidiary clues for *our* meanings; we experience “the inherent quality of our experience for its own sake” (*PK*, 197). But, at the same time, Polanyi seems to recognize the impossibility of eradicating our conceptual frameworks. The very possibility of giving up all humanly constructed tacit structure for an original experience of things in themselves is in deep tension with Polanyi’s own epistemology. Polanyi uses the unfortunate metaphor of conceptual frameworks creating a “screen between” us and reality (*PK*, 197)—as if there were a pure way of seeing things—whereas the deep value of Polanyi’s work is to show us that our meaning structures normally provide our very *access* to reality. Our meanings provide a conduit rather than a screen—or a screen that is a better or worse interface rather than a barrier. We therefore cannot sustain a seeing that completely abandons all interpretive frameworks. This mystical experience would thus be a continually thwarted transnatural effort for Polanyi, and that insight is reflected in how Polanyi understood the practice of Christianity.

## 2. *Happiness or Hopeful Anguish?*

In science and in moral traditions, the heuristic of questions leads to consummatory and satisfying answers brought by new paradigms or new ways of being. One would thus think that religion could also provide an answer to the problem of suffering with an experience of God or Love that is a satisfying solution. But Polanyi sees the practice of ritual worship in Christianity to be different than any other heuristic practice geared toward discovery and achievement. Worship, according to Polanyi, does allow us to “see God” by allowing us to dwell in the right sort of incompatibles,<sup>14</sup> but

the dwelling of the Christian worshipper within the ritual of divine service differs from any other dwelling within a framework of inherent excellence, by the fact that this dwelling is not enjoyed...The ritual of worship is expressly designed to induce and sustain this state of anguish, surrender and hope...the indwelling of the Christian worshipper is therefore a continued attempt at breaking out, at casting off the condition of man, even while humbly acknowledging its inescapability (*PK*, 198).

I have presented the possibility that something like a *via negativa* through suffering and its contemplation might be a path to a way of being that brings happiness. Mystical enlightenment might then be a *solution* to fundamental questions raised by the human condition. For me, this inquiry progressed along the stages of discovery, from the question, through the dark night, and to its *Eureka* achievement. For Polanyi, in contrast, for worshipping Christians this human question is forever nobly stalled at the dark night of the soul.

“Christian worship... is like an obsession with a problem known to be insoluble, which yet follows, against reason, unswervingly, the heuristic command: Look at the unknown!” (PK, 199).

Polanyi is unclear on whether the same stunted vision he presents for Christian worship, is also the plight and reward of the Christian mystic, or if he sees the mystic—who experiences the world as cosmos—to be happily living out of the answer to his quest. Polanyi seems to indicate that the goal of the *via negativa* is indistinguishable from the ideal experience of the Christian worshiper when he suggests that the mystic’s experience may be a short-cut to understanding Christian worship. He says that “breaking out of our normal conceptual framework[s]” makes us ““become like little children,”” which is “a short-cut to the understanding of Christianity” (PK, 198; *Meaning*, 129). But an *enjoyed* fulfillment of that ideal goal seems only available through the short-cut, if at all. So it may be that Polanyi considers mystical experience to be, like religious worship, a continually thwarted effort at a solution and a transnatural integration that is impossible to sustain.

### ***3. Enlightenment: New Structure or the Eradication of Structure?***

I believe that part of what motivated Polanyi to stop at the dark night, if he did, was his answer to the question of whether mystical experience should be understood as the consciousness that emerges when there is a *negation of all interpretive frameworks*, or whether mystical experience is the development of a new way of being with a *new interpretive framework*. Polanyi seems to look at the *via negativa* as a “radical anti-intellectualism” (PK, 198; *Meaning*, 129). He understood its forward focal point to be an unintelligible and invisible God. Perhaps he did not then see how an articulate answer could possibly be provided for our basic moral questions when reason is abandoned and when the interpretive center is so opaque as to be invisible.

Polanyi seems to have supposed that mystical experience reverts to the experience of things as they are before our purposes conscript them, and that the simple eradication of conceptual structure brings about some “unfathomable intuition” (*Meaning*, 128). There are indeed *prima facie* reasons to suspect that there is no new structure: the all-encompassing nature of the *via negativa* and its attack on our meanings; the absence of an attachment to desires stirred by our ordinary meanings; the surrender of the self or ego, which is usually the center that the *from-to* integrations serve; and the immersion in the present and the particular, which indicates a lack of concern with the further integrations governed by our meanings and their concomitant purposes.

But there are also reasons to suspect that new structure is involved: the suspicion that this experience is not available to other animals, but that one must pass through language and ego first; the heuristic satisfaction of the experience for the mystic or suffering pilgrim; the accompanying feeling of wonder or bliss as opposed to apathy, meaningless despair, or some neutral emotion; and the feeling that there is some meaning and wholeness that the self is caught up in—a new center that it is in communion with—expressed by Polanyi as an experience of cosmos.

As a method, anti-intellectualism and mystery prevail, but in the solution I see as the mystic’s experience this is not necessarily the case. Polanyi at times also seems to recognize that tacit structure and meaning again re-appear in the mystic’s achievement. He says, “religious ecstasy is an *articulate passion* and resembles sensual passion only in the surrender achieved by it” (PK, 198, my italics). The sort of experience of the world and its things that one has seems very dependent on the sort of articulate structure one is breaking out from. The presence of a submerged articulate structure that can be partially specified, by which meaning is experienced, seems indeed the main difference Polanyi sees between the religious worshiper (indwelling in service) or mystic (indwelling

in cosmos), and the Sartrean protagonist who experiences despair rather than hope when his normal structures of meaning are destroyed (*PK*, 199). Some background contexts clear the way for wonder and love, some do not. Even Aristotle's description of the "happiness" that follows from being broken betrays a clue to the presence of a deeper articulate structure at play that helps to mould the resulting experience: happiness comes when the person is broken, but only "provided one is still good."

If the experience of transformation were a simple negation that brought us to a primeval experience of the world—some original perception before the advent of human meanings—one might suppose that the experience is one that many other animals enjoy. But does every animal experience mystical unity? It seems a precondition of this experience that one first have a self to abandon and conceptual frameworks to discard or transcend.

The experience seems to be more than the ego-less experience animals have of the world. Some requirements might be the conceptualizations brought by language; the self-consciousness that the ability to conceptualize brings; the separation from the interpretive frameworks that rational thought can initiate; and even the human sort of suffering that hopes and desires bring. These all may be required stages leading beyond the way of being of animals into the way of being of the saint. We can speculate that there is no way out without going through, and if so, the ground must be prepared.<sup>15</sup>

#### **IV. Breaking Through to Happiness: A Transnatural Achievement**

In the *Polanyian* picture I presented, spiritual transformation follows the typical pattern of a discovery in knowing and being; a new paradigm of meaning and center of integration is lived out from. In contrast, Polanyi sees the achievement as a breaking free from our structures of knowing and our typical conceptual machinery for understanding being. It may be that the solution to the human condition and the next stage of human development toward which we are drawn is both a breaking out *and* a breaking in—a sort of sideways solution that uses our epistemological machinery differently than normal but *also* manifests a new meaningful way of being with a new integrated, emergent center. It may be that, as Polanyi suspects, there is no new structure of the *same order*, but new possibilities for knowing and being emerge that allow us to transcend our old meaning-making structures and our old ways of living through them.

Looking a little closer at the range of experiences Polanyi brings together in discussing breaking out and their common features helps show that we may not be dealing with a simple negation of structure, nor a new structure of the same type, but a new order of structure.

##### ***1. Loss of "Self," Living in the Present, and Virtue For Itself***

Polanyi discusses the accidental breaking out that comes in between our scientific achievements; he also discusses the intentional breaking out that can be pursued in ecstatic vision, mystical experience, religious ecstasy, and the aesthetic perception of the Zen master (*PK*, 196-199, *Meaning*, 128). Furthermore, "Music, poetry, painting, the arts, whether abstract or representative—are a dwelling in and a breaking out which lie somewhere between science and worship" (*PK*, 199).

Common to all these experiences, for Polanyi, the ego is lost and the self is submerged or swept up, and what is ordinary takes on a new aspect. In worship rituals, one is caught up in a comprehensive way by the

performance of the practices and one surrenders the self and its will (*PK*, 198). The arts can also help us break out because they “enable a person to surrender himself” (*PK*, 196) and then draw on “pre-conceptual capacities” (*PK*, 199). In contemplation, the interpretive structures the self normally uses can be swept away leaving a consciousness void of the ego’s filtering observations and manipulations. The self is, however, not completely lost; according to Polanyi, we still have the developed structure that is our individual consciousness. This is why Polanyi discusses Zen and the Christian mystic tradition but consciously excludes Yoga, since it goes beyond extinguishing “the intellectual framework of perception” and attempts to extinguish “our very existence as individual transmigrating beings” (*Meaning*, 129). This, at least in intent, goes beyond the aim of an egoless self-consciousness to an extinguishing of self and its consciousness into a universal consciousness, which, in turn, goes beyond what Polanyi sees happening in mystical experience.

Polanyi suggests that by breaking out of the self and its “fixed conceptual frameworks” we are *poured directly into experience* and can “become completely absorbed in the inherent quality of our experience for its own sake” (*PK*, 196-7). Before enlightenment, the seeker drinks tea, after enlightenment, the master drinks tea. Nothing changes but everything changes, because the master is fully present in the drinking of the tea, and drinking tea means nothing beyond the act itself. Yet each act resonates with some greater meaning and satisfaction; each act becomes a sacrament. This mystical experience of being fully present to present experience is confirmed in Simone Weil’s aphorism: “The highest ecstasy is the attention at its fullest.”

This absorption in present experience, for Polanyi, accounts for the “impersonality of intense contemplation” which is a “complete participation of the person in that which he contemplates.” It is a “self-abandonment” that “can be described either as egocentric or as selfless, depending on whether one refers to the contemplator’s visionary act or to the submergence of his person” (197). Contemplation can therefore effect an abandonment of the ego as the focal lens; the ego and its desires and aversions can be “submerged” when one is completely absorbed in present experience.

This notion of performing acts simply for themselves and experiencing them with full attention in the present—and without conscripting them into our own meanings and purposes—lends another dimension to why we should practice virtue *for itself*. Doing virtuous acts for themselves is not merely a way of helping us to break out of an existing conceptual framework; it is perhaps also a way of helping us break out of *all* ordinary conceptual frameworks. Practicing a virtuous act for its own sake would then become a token case of how all our actions should be performed, not only in training, but in mastery.

The dissolution of the “self” or the ego and its concerns would seem enough to pour consciousness into an experience of the present. Conversely, the focus on the present through contemplation or the practice of virtue for itself seems a way to disengage from the ego and its desires, but does a new center with new meanings displace the ego and condition the transformed experience of the world? The ego-submerged experience of artistic contemplation may give a taste of the ego-less experience of enlightened transformation.

## ***2. Aesthetic Experience as a Clue to Structure Beyond Structure***

In *Meaning*, Polanyi and Harry Prosch describe in more detail how the self is surrendered and caught up in experience through art and Zen. Poetry, for instance, can reveal the “wonder of our being” that arises by “purging our usual chaotic experience of the film of familiarity” (*Meaning*, 128). Here Polanyi also describes the aesthetic perception of the Zen practitioner, and tells us that the experience of the Zen Buddhist can “throw light on the whole range of other mystical visions” (130).

Art can help one can break out of one's current conceptual framework. This is an important part of the aesthetic experience as understood by Kant who, as Polanyi notes, emphasized *disinterested* contemplation as the main feature of aesthetic experience (*Meaning*, 87).<sup>16</sup> Kant theorized that in good art there was a purposiveness unconstrained by the purpose that would come with a clear concept.<sup>17</sup> This break with a ruling conceptual frame allows us to engage the work of art in a free play of the imagination. Polanyi posits more engagement than do other theorists of aesthetic contemplation—in his understanding of art one is swept up by the meanings generated by the artist—but, in a way similar to Kant's aesthetic theory, one is still suspended by the distance created by the frame around the work of art. We see here then a species of *breaking out* similar to the one experienced by the scientist caught between two paradigms.

The frame created by the meter, the canvas, or the stage allows us to break out of our own meanings and imaginatively dwell in the meanings provided by the artist.<sup>18</sup> But although we are drawn out of our own background meanings, we are not fully consumed within the new meanings that an integration of the artists' clues provide. This is why we do not engage with those meanings as we would our own. For example, we do not call the police when someone is "murdered" on the stage (*Meaning*, 83, 87).

Zen, like art, also aims at breaking us out of our ordinary interpretive framework, but the frame that sets off art from the self and its meanings, and allows us to step into the vision of the artist, at first appears to be missing. Polanyi sees that this frame is indeed there. It is created by the arduous training of the Zen practitioner itself, "which detaches his life from the flow of normal experience" (*Meaning*, 130). Everything is thus experienced as a beautiful artwork as the practitioner is "poured," as Polanyi says, "straight into experience" (*PK*, 197) by virtue of transcending his conceptual frameworks.

Mystical experience, like Zen and art, could be conceived as a comprehensive liberation from conceptual frameworks, but more properly it appears to be a *dwelling in* that still maintains a strange sort of intimate distance from that which is dwelled in. Rather than a new meaning structure generated by the clues of the artist, what we dwell in could still be our same own interpretive framework, i.e., our own self-created meanings. And so Zen would be similar to art, but only at a more comprehensive scale: it engages—yet is disengaged from—all one's interpretive structures. It sees rabbits or ducks as they are in the present, but judges them not—at least not in our ordinary way of judging through principles that have evolved in our typical order of conceptual frameworks.

Being able to dwell in different interpretive frames seems a requirement for aesthetic experience, and so being able to be in a particular relation to an interpretive framework, or in a particular relationship to *all* interpretive frameworks of a similar order, seems integral to the mystical experience. At the very least this points to a new use of our epistemological equipment via which we experience reality. No longer are we moving *through* our ordinary *from-to* structures in which we are consumed by the personal meanings we construct. The normal move *from* clues *to* meanings and meaningful things in conceptual schemes is now made the *to* of some different *from*. We have retained the developed structure of an individual consciousness and we now have a different relation to those meanings because we have either backed away from a familiar type level—or moved up to a new type level.

The sense of wonder at all *things* still requires things and hence, a Polanyian would suspect, some artifact of our integrated meanings; their thingness as rabbits or ducks is still generated by our meanings, but we are no longer *attached* to the meanings in the same way. Concomitantly we are also detached from our own desires. We might still have them, but we are not consumed by them as is the case when we dwell in them without

this distance. And since the enlightened mystic is no longer attached to her desires and their outcomes, one can see in breaking out a *sideways* if not a head on solution to the problem of human suffering: breaking out might somehow converge with breaking in.

### 3. *From Spirituality to God: A Polanyian Trinity*

Is there some new center to this sideways solution to the human condition that we are seeing *through*, or are in communion with? Is there a new comprehensive meaning, like that generated by the artist, only now generated as the solution to our quest, that is informed by—if not formed by—the experience of breaking out?

If we are breaking through one level of integrations, i.e., the *from-to* of our ordinary conceptualizations, to a totalizing experience whereby we make *that* process (of cognition and concept formation) itself part of the *to* of our *from*, the unity we are looking *from* might be that which generates all things for us.<sup>19</sup> We can speculate then, using clues Polanyi provides regarding seeing things in themselves, that breaking out amounts to stepping behind our ordinary processes of clue integration into things and meanings and into some identification with that which is behind the process of thing and meaning construction itself. The mystic's experience of this center, which is outside of our normal construction of beings in time and space, would then seem to be an experience of Being itself.

Whereas the conception of an emergent center that fuses incompatibles harkens back to the Hegelian concrete universal, the conception of a center that breaks us out from our concepts harkens back to the Transcendental Idealists' noumenal source of the world of experience and Husserl's notion of the transcendental ego. In breaking out—if we are truly negating our conceptual integrations—the mystic would then likely be in touch with a noumenal experience of Being, or the timeless, formless source of all beings. Breaking out would then provide a third Polanyian conception of God that is different from both the telic organizing principle (the Drawing Forward) and the emergent joint comprehension (the Breaking In). We can see Beauty in this experience (since it is the very source of aesthetic experience); and a new level of Truth (since it now looks upon the process of truth and meaning making); and we may recognize, through the testimony of the enlightened, that it is Good (and beyond good and evil). But similar to the telic God, and the emergent-yet-transcendent God,<sup>20</sup> this breaking out God could be finite: it may be local to the individual and his or her epistemological and cognitive machinery rather than some universal, eternal point of origin.

But this again is a *Polanyian* conception based on some of the things Polanyi says about breaking out. Polanyi himself apparently sees the unifying center experienced in breaking out as the integration of incompatibles lived by the worshipper, or—equivalently, via a “short-cut”—as the cosmos of the mystic. Polanyi's own candidate for God here is more likely an ultimate integration of all things and meanings into a joint comprehension that *transcends* rather than *negates* of our conceptual frameworks. In Polanyi's understanding of such transcendence, all our experiences would form a new joint comprehension, i.e. the integration of incompatibles. This new “being” above beings is what we would then experience via the integration, rather than Being, i.e., some non-thing we back up into. Contrary to indications Polanyi provides in discussing breaking out, Polanyi's God therefore again appears to be something transcendent that we *break into* seeing rather than something transcendental that we might back into union with when we *break out*.

In sorting out the ambiguities Polanyi presents when attempting to apply his epistemology and ontology to religion and spirituality we have found two possible explanations of spiritual transformation that

might converge, a breaking in and a breaking out. We have also seen Polanyi posit a telic organizing principle that draws humanity and the universe forward in evolutionary achievement through both biological development and intellectual striving. Each of these conceptions brings with it a different understanding of God: God as the eternal and unfathomable Being beyond beings, experienced in *breaking out*; God as the joint comprehension of our virtuous practices and the emergent answer to the human heuristic striving, witnessed in *breaking in*; and God as the telic field that draws matter forward into the noosphere and beyond.

Do we have reason to suspect that these three candidates for God might be the same God? After all, while the experience of *breaking in* generates new goals through the development of new meanings, the experience of *breaking out* and its immersion in present experience would seem to separate one from any meaning-induced goals; the enlightened mystic has the feeling that everything is *already* alright just as it is, and there is really nothing one must do beyond simply being. Yet these apparent incompatibles may be part of a same solution to the human condition.

That these three Gods might be different dimensions of one God, following the metaphor of the Father (breaking out), the Son (breaking in) and the Holy Spirit (drawing forward) may be conjectured through the inklings of clues. For instance, while it is not odd that the mystic experiences *wonder* in breaking out beyond our conceptually conditioned experience of things, it is odd that she experiences love. And while it is not odd that the religious seeker, in overcoming suffering, experiences love (since in overcoming suffering one can properly identify with and feel compassion for those who are still suffering), it is odd that he would feel wonder at each bit of creation. One might then conjecture that perhaps the center we are breaking *through* to is the same for both the Zen master and the enlightened religious innovator. And if these sorts of transformation are called forth through our intellectual struggles with the limits of conceptualization as we search for deeper truth (e.g., in Zen and *via negativa*) or through the heuristic of our human condition (e.g., in Jesus and the Buddha) then we might also expect that the reality revealed by breaking out or breaking in is also the organizing principle that draws life forward from matter.

## V. “Look at the Unknown!”

Polanyi looked upon the Christian faith as that of a crucified, rather than a resurrected, God. He saw religion as a melancholy endeavor; the worshiper is in a state of perpetual anguish and unrealizable hope, rather than in a state of happiness. This seems Polanyi’s estimation of the human condition given the limits of our knowledge and political achievements (see *Meaning*, 209, 213-214) rather than a solution to the problems of the human condition. Although Polanyi converted to Christianity from Judaism, he does not see his religion providing a solution, but as continually regenerating the problem. His religion can be comforting, perhaps, in the way that listening to the blues is comforting for the broken soul. It might be that Polanyi’s scenario is an accurate description of current practices. Perhaps the more a spiritual insight grows into a traditional institution, the less capable it is of effecting radical change. It might be that a true transformation is too difficult, or maybe the Pharisees stand at the gates to the kingdom of heaven and turn people away, i.e., they present the law without the ability to generate its spirit. But there does seem to be a solution, a key to the gates, buried at the core of the faith, that perhaps is in need of resurrection. The dark night might then pass to a dawn of a discovery, and the soul might experience an answer that resolves the tension and anxiety Polanyi describes as insoluble.

I see spiritual enlightenment as such an achievement; a solution that became available about 2500 years ago across many cultures in the era of Lao Tzu, Siddhartha Gotama and Socrates, but one still too rare and difficult

to sustain. It is thus possible to break free of the human condition, but, as stated earlier, to conceive this new experience as the unity of human consciousness with an infinite, eternal consciousness, or an ultimate source and *telos* of all, is beyond what we can claim by reason alone.

Polanyi allows for the freedom and open-endedness of being; we are creative in the project of creating ourselves and our meanings. But Polanyi also advocates the notion that we are called forth to higher levels of being and consciousness, some of which may be sustained as achievements in the course of human history. He takes emphasis away from a finalistic teleology and away from the supernatural and instead speaks of more free and finite telic and transnatural goals that are sustained by ontic and epistemic structures.

The way of being of the moral exemplar constitutes an answer to deep and pervasive questions regarding the human condition. The good person builds his character and solves the problems that new situations bring by actively engaging an ever-changing world. In this engagement, he actualizes his own being and displays his way of being in his words and actions. In a Polanyian ethic, the need to transform one's way of being in order to experience the answer achieved by the good person, provides the solution to the paradoxes. We follow the rules and principles of morality dutifully in order to surpass the law and achieve a masterful way of being. We aim to perform virtues for themselves so that we may reconstitute our own being into that of the happy person. And in the case of the saint, who acts with no egoistic desire and lives powerfully in the present, we see a new form of spiritual awareness that performing acts *for themselves* can also generate.

As moral agents we are placed in the context of a community of inquirers driven with questions about the right way to live. We look forward into the unknown with passion as we shape our being through our actions. And we understand that there may be more ahead that we cannot now fully understand.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Similarly, although we are in a culture and language distant from that of 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. classical Greece, we can hope to cross logical gaps to practice virtue in a way that is structurally similar to Aristotle's.

<sup>2</sup>Another example is how Kant came to understand the command "love one another." For him this "love" was based in duty rather than emotion. How else, Kant asks, could it be possible to love one's enemies? [Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* in *Classics of Western Philosophy*, ed., Steven M. Cahn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 1066-7].

<sup>3</sup>Polanyi notices this shift and subsequent misuse of language, for example, when he recognizes how truth values shift "whenever a language apposite to one subject matter is used with reference to another altogether different matter" (*PK*, 282).

<sup>4</sup>See Lowney, *TAD*, 36:1, 2009, 48-49 regarding this *epagoge*.

<sup>5</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism* in *Classics of Western Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, 1134.

<sup>6</sup>Perhaps because, knowing the outcomes and the ensuing gratitude, only God could get away with inflicting that much suffering.

<sup>7</sup>Consider the passages: "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God" (Galatians 2:19), and "Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God" (Romans 7:4).

<sup>8</sup>This is the common translation of "*Dilige et quod vis fac*" in St. Augustine's 7th Sermon on the First Letter of St. John. "*Diligere*" can also be translated "respect", which again may bring together the notions of

love and duty.

<sup>9</sup>I wish to thank Drew Leder for his comments on an earlier version of this paper. Relevant here, he wrote, “Buddhists give thanks for the ‘Three Jewels’ – the Buddha, or enlightened being, the ‘Dharma,’ his teachings, and the Sangha, the spiritual community needed to support the aspirant.”

<sup>10</sup>Michael Oakeshott worked with a similar distinction between the religious, which escaped time, and religions, whose moralities had timely concerns.

<sup>11</sup>Here Polanyi cites: V. Lossky, *Essai sur la Theologie mystique de l’Eglise d’Orient*, Paris, 1944, p.25.

<sup>12</sup>The practices push at the very bounds of even meanings that seem based on self-evident conceptual truths, as is clear in the *koans* of Zen Buddhism, e.g., “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

<sup>13</sup>Intense contemplation can also lead to “ecstatic vision,” which is another instance of breaking out.

As observers or manipulators of experience we are guided *by* experience and pass *through* experience without experiencing it *in itself*. The conceptual framework by which we observe and manipulate things being present [functions] as a screen between ourselves and these things...Contemplation dissolves the screen, stops our movement through experience and pours us straight into experience...we cease to deal with things and become absorbed in the inherent quality of our experience for its own sake (*PK*, 197).

<sup>14</sup>“It is therefore only through participation in acts of worship—through dwelling in these—that we see God...God is a commitment involved in our rites and myths” (*Meaning*, 156).

<sup>15</sup>Polanyi looks at the development of the person in the psychology of Bleuler and Piaget to see stages in the development of consciousness. These stages can reflect stages of development in historical consciousness in the same way ontogenetic changes in the fetus can reflect the evolutionary stages of the biological species (ontogenesis replicates phylogenesis). We move from an “autistic” stage, similar to that present in animal awareness more generally, to develop egos and to become persons. In this autistic stage, we do not possess self-consciousness nor recognize ourselves as distinct from the world. “Only as we become divided from the world, can we achieve a personhood capable of committing itself consciously to beliefs concerning the world, and incurring thereby a fiduciary hazard” (*PK*, 313). Ironically, only after we become divided from the world can we come to experience mystical unity.

<sup>16</sup>For Kant, our ordinary cognitive faculties thus come to function in a non-ordinary way [George Dickie, *Introduction to Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 25]. Kant, however, makes the aesthetic experience appear to be a pleasant misuse of our faculties rather than an opening to a new dimension of meaning.

<sup>17</sup>This also relates to how Kant saw teleological structures: as regulative concepts that were not about the world as it is in itself, but which were needed by our limited minds to gain some understanding of the world.

<sup>18</sup>In the experience of an artwork “...whenever our powers of integration produce a coherence, they do so by cutting off the subsidiaries of this integrated body from connection with other experiences. This, in fact, is the principle which turns every discovery, invention, or work of art into a sort of reality with life, so to speak, of its own” (*Meaning*, 85).

<sup>19</sup>If our ordinary processes of conceptual integration are stepped back from, one might expect a sense of time and space to be displaced, at least to the degree that our conceptual frameworks condition those experiences. This, according to Polanyi, accounts for the “new vivid yet dreamlike reality...not an objective reality” (*PK*, 197). But even if our ordinary conceptual frameworks are transcended, we could expect to have an experience of space and time different from the “objective reality” we’ve grown accustomed to, since we would come to experience things through a new meaning structure.

<sup>20</sup>Polanyi’s ontology shows how God can be seen either as immanent or transcendent; God is “immanent” in that the particulars are part of, though subsidiary to, the intelligent gestalt, but “transcendent” in that the gestalt is more than the sum of the parts and might even provide the organizing principle that called forth the parts into being in the first place.