

Polanyi's Arguments against a Non-Judgmental Political Science

Jon Fennell

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Michael Polanyi articulates two arguments against the view that moral judgment has no proper place in the conduct of political science: Non-judgmental political science cannot understand what it studies; and non-judgmental political science cannot understand the political scientist himself. Evaluation of these arguments not only clarifies important dimensions of Polanyi's conceptions of understanding and tacit inference, it prompts a reconsideration of the nature of both moral deliberation and moral truth. The encounter with Polanyi demonstrates that non-judgmental political science does indeed fall short of its stated objective.

It is something great and greatening to cherish an ideal; to act in the light of truth that is far-away and far above; to set aside the near advantage, the momentary pleasure; the snatching of seeming good to self; and to act for remoter ends, for higher good, and for interests other than our own.

Joshua Chamberlain
"Dedication of the Maine Monuments"
Gettysburg, PA, on October 3, 1888

In "The Message of the Hungarian Revolution," a brief but strikingly prescient article from 1966, Michael Polanyi offers two arguments against the proposition that, while moral judgments and moral motivation may be among the phenomena studied by political science, moral judgment has no proper place in the conduct of such science. Behavioral science, it is said, cannot determine whether the moral judgments of the persons it studies are "right or not, since this observation would constitute a moral judgment which science is not competent to make."¹ Both of Polanyi's arguments against this position derive their power from an alleged inconsistency. We must ask, then, whether such inconsistency on the part of non-judgmental political science in fact exists. And, if it does, is it truly crippling? More deeply, whatever may be the fate of Polanyi's arguments, are there other grounds in his thought for sustaining his conclusion that moral judgments properly belong to political science, and behavioral science generally?

Argument One: Non-Judgmental Political Science Cannot Understand What It Studies

Polanyi's first argument is by far the more complex. It begins with the premise that "[a]ll men, whatever their professions, make moral judgments." By "moral judgment" Polanyi is referring to the familiar practice in which we conclude that an action, whether our own or that of another, is good or bad, right or wrong. Already,

however, a distinction summons our attention. While it would be fractious to deny that all men make moral judgments, what in fact is taking place when they do so? Polanyi, recognizing the need to secure his flank, at once sets forth his second premise: implicit in moral judgment is “submission to a standard [that] has universal intent.” To make a moral judgment is to affirm the validity of an authority that is binding on everyone. What, however, are we to do with the cynical riposte that while men certainly are apt to believe moral judgments are informed by objective authority, this is nothing more than a convenient delusion? The cynic admits that he makes moral judgments; but those judgments, he asserts, have nothing to do with authoritative universal standards, since such standards do not exist. But again Polanyi anticipates the interlocutor. His third premise states that implicit in appeal to a universal standard, an appeal that for him resides at the heart of moral judgment, is recognition of the distinction between truth and illusion, conjoined with the affirmation that the standard is in fact real. This in turn leads to Polanyi’s fourth premise: corresponding to the ontological distinction between moral truth and moral illusion are two varieties of motivation. In the face of moral truth, an action is good (or bad) insofar as it is reasonably classified as being in accordance with (or in violation of) the standard in question. This is in contrast with moral illusion, where the motivation for judgment is a form of seduction.²

Preliminary Reflections

Before examining the conclusions that Polanyi draws from these premises, let us reflect on what has been said thus far. To begin with, Polanyi would have us understand “moral standards which we hold to be valid” to be equivalent to “moral standards [that are] binding on all men.” But is this true? The ancient Incas, in order to please the gods and to secure eternal life for the targeted individuals, selected the most innocent of their children and buried them alive at the summit of the highest mountain that they knew. To readers of this essay, such a practice will surely seem the product of moral illusion, if not something much worse. This is not to deny, of course, the earnestness of the Incan beliefs. It is precisely because the children were dear that they were selected; and to carry them to the peak of a 20,000 foot mountain demonstrates a remarkable commitment that occasioned what may well have been the crowning act of an Incan’s life. Still, none of us, including Polanyi, would allow that the ancient Incas were acting in light of a real moral standard that is binding on everyone. But how are we to accommodate the perspective of the Incan? Surely, he understands himself to be acting free of illusion and in accordance with a morally incumbent rule. Quite possibly the children and their families joined in this judgment. Attempts to interfere with the practice would be viewed as immoral. Yet, Polanyi would say the Incan was the victim of illusion, while the Hungarian revolutionaries that are the focus of his article were acting reasonably, which is to say under the authority of a standard whose domain is universal. The issue, then, is this: if there exists no failsafe element within the perspective of the actors to distinguish between moral reality and moral illusion, wherein lies the grounds for the distinction? Whose judgment is involved? And when?

To get at these questions it is useful to look at what Polanyi means by “evidence.” He states that our “awareness of moral truth is founded on the recognition of a valid claim, which can be reasonably argued for and supported by evidence.”³ As opposed, then, to the motivation by “seduction” that marks moral illusion, when acting in accordance with moral truth, we look for and find reasons (i.e., evidence) for our judgments. Recognizing the authority of these reasons, we give way to them. An analysis by Polanyi of “true coherence,” from a somewhat later article, casts needed light on this vague formulation.⁴ In this account, Polanyi begins by reminding us of the famous drawing in which it is possible to see a vase, or two human profiles, but not both at the same time. Viewers of the drawing typically can with little effort switch from one way of seeing the drawing to the other, and

back. While being able to see the drawing in one way or the other represents for Polanyi a successful integration of the available clues, doing so falls short of “true coherence.” The reason this effort falls short is that in alternately viewing the drawing as a vase or a pair of profiles, we fail to reach a full commitment. In contrast, and representative of the coherence of understanding that purports to capture reality, is deliberation by a jury. Members of a jury are also faced with alternative interpretations of a set of clues. But, as opposed to the viewer of the ambiguous drawing, a member of the jury must reach a decision “under the discipline of a grim responsibility.”⁵ Only when a decision about the world is arrived at (and the various alternatives ruled out) do we, says Polanyi, establish true coherence. Such understanding naturally and unavoidably becomes grounds for action. And, as we act, we encounter evidence relevant to our belief. To be true, a belief must not only make sense, it must successfully withstand the challenge of reality.

“Evidence” for Polanyi refers, then, to what in the past followed from embracing a particular moral principle, as well as what is likely to follow from embracing that principle in the future. One is reminded of the biblical observation: “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:16). We distinguish truth from illusion by attending to their consequences. Now, by alternately viewing the drawing as a vase and a pair of human profiles, we avoid serious and enduring commitment. We systematically refrain from acting on the basis of our transient understanding. The matter is trivial. But what are we to say about our ancient Incan? He vehemently embraces his principles and clearly demonstrates commitment. What permits us to assert that he is in the grips of illusion? To begin with, note that Polanyi’s distinction between truth and illusion is forward looking. Whether a principle is true or, instead, the product of illusion can be known only *ex post facto*.⁶ What Polanyi says regarding natural laws holds for moral laws as well: “To hold a natural law to be true is to believe that its presence may reveal itself in yet unknown and perhaps yet unthinkable consequences; it is to believe that natural laws are features of a reality which as such will continue to bear consequences inexhaustibly.”⁷ True belief points to something real and possesses “heuristic power.”⁸ That is, embracing and acting upon truth leads to new understandings and fresh discoveries. One’s world is richer, clearer and more meaningful. In short, “the truth of a proposition lies in its bearing on reality”; but this means “its implications [are] indeterminate.”⁹ As Socrates warns in *Protagoras* (314A-B), in order to evaluate “doctrines” it is necessary to give oneself to them and see what ensues. There is a risk. But this, says Polanyi, is good and necessary. The possibility of injury is inseparable from the prospect of gain. The evaluation that yields the judgment that a belief is true or illusory is always personal, but it can and ought to be a response to what we have learned from others as much as it is a response to our direct experience. Due to such vigilance, that which appeared to the actor as moral truth may prove to be illusion. Our judgment is subject to revision in light of what follows from holding it. It is because of the vital role played by responsible assessment that Polanyi states that “[t]ruth becomes the rightness of an action.”¹⁰ Insofar as belief and the resulting action and consequences are right, they are true.¹¹ The moral imperative, therefore, is to do the best we can with what we can reasonably know (as opposed to what we *do* know, since weakness of character, inattention, etc., may impede our taking full responsibility).

Let us imagine the perspective of the contemporary descendant of the ancient Incan or, even more tellingly, the perspective of the ancient Incan himself subsequent to his conversion to, say, Christianity. The former practices—burying children alive—would, in the light of newly understood principles, be seen as erroneous. Perhaps in this case “erroneous” is too strong a term and we ought instead to say “incomplete.” After all, the converted actor still wishes to please the deity and to secure eternal life for those that are dear to him. What has changed is that he now understands that the preservation of an innocent child (securing for the child in this world a full and autonomous life) is of primary importance. This would not constitute abandonment of the earlier moral standards and the corresponding commitments. It would instead be to understand them more fully and in

conjunction with equally important (and heretofore overlooked) standards. Whether erroneous or simply incomplete, however, the earlier views are understood to be in need of revision.¹²

This account of morality highlights an important element of Polanyi's "educated mind."¹³ A person with an educated mind recognizes the fallibility of all human judgment, including one's understanding of moral truth. Such an individual, however, is nonetheless willing and able to embrace fully his highest principles. He lives openly and unhesitatingly in allegiance to what he believes is true. He gives himself without reservation to the truth (even while remaining open to the "evidence"—this openness being one of his highest principles). For Polanyi, a defining characteristic of an honest life—a life of integrity and discovery—is to admit the fallible nature of our central principles even while wholeheartedly continuing to give ourselves to them. This is a life of pronounced faith. On Polanyi's view, this attitude, and the corresponding stance toward the world, characterized the very core of Christian existence.¹⁴

An Objection

As noted above, Polanyi celebrates the "educated mind" that, while recognizing the fallibility of its (and all other) moral beliefs, nevertheless wholeheartedly embraces what it believes. Such a mind defines the good life in terms of a never-ending process of inquiry, revision, and discovery. One's highest ideals and aspirations have an indispensable role, but this is one of stimulus or attractive prospect, not an actual final destination. The educated mind has been weaned of such expectations. It is more mature than that.

In a penetrating critique of Isaiah Berlin's influential *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Leo Strauss, a prominent twentieth century political philosopher whose work has returned to prominence, comments on the author's approving citation of the following declaration by Joseph Schumpeter: "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian."¹⁵ In his response to this assertion, Strauss begins by observing that Schumpeter and Berlin, despite their claim, in fact believe that at least one thing is not relatively valid—namely, that "the right position toward any primary end [permits us to distinguish] between civilized men and barbarians." But this, says Strauss, is to be expected, since it is the fate of any "thinking" person "to take a final stand, an absolute stand in accordance with what he regards as the nature of man or as the nature of the human condition or as the decisive truth, and hence to assert the absolute validity of his fundamental conviction."¹⁶ Strauss goes on to note, "This does not mean, of course, that [Schumpeter's] fundamental conviction is sound. One reason why I doubt that it is sound is that if [Schumpeter] were right, every resolute liberal hack or thug would be a civilized man, while Plato and Kant would be barbarians."¹⁷ It would seem, therefore, that in Strauss's view Polanyi, like Schumpeter and Berlin, not only is inconsistent but also wrong regarding the nature and stature of moral belief.

This, however, is to misunderstand Polanyi. There is an "as-if" in Polanyi's account of moral truth and the educated mind that is absent from the position occupied by Schumpeter and Berlin. It is because of this element that Polanyi likens his portrayal of moral conviction to Christianity. He asks that we understand moral truth as describing a condition that can and ought to be the case. We are to act as if the principle were true. There is here a respect for the absolute, and an impulse toward it, that is absent from what Schumpeter and Berlin maintain is highest for man. Granted, Polanyi remains open to the lessons of experience. These are indispensable to discovery. But Polanyi aspires to that which is real, external to the individual, and possibly beyond revision and

change. Most important, he believes that this very aspiration is a necessary condition for the most significant discovery. Nothing like this is detectable in Berlin's approving citation of Schumpeter.

We might say that Polanyi is "younger" than Schumpeter and Berlin. Although he is as much a product as they of the historicist intellectual milieu of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, he escapes the clutches of that world (including its nearly irresistible momentum toward moral and cultural relativism). He does so through a form of intellectual and moral rebirth within which the absolute returns to life. This, moreover, occurs without recourse to the Nietzschean willfulness (the self-conscious reevaluation of values) that is the closing focus of Strauss's essay. The Nietzschean response to "objective history" (the history that recognizes the relative situated character of all moral convictions and ideals) falls well short of what is set forth by Polanyi. Polanyi aims higher by affirming the reality of the transcendent. He offers an account of moral truth in which not only do all the candidates for this designation throughout history become genuine contenders for commitment and belief, but they may also be authoritatively evaluated and ranked.

So, Strauss is correct about the necessity of taking a final stand. But Polanyi's final stand is fundamentally different from that of Schumpeter and Berlin. He states that while belief is always subject to revision, it is a cheapening of human possibilities to close off in advance the possibility of arriving at a truth that is absolute, and hence binding in every time and place. Indeed, Polanyi vehemently calls for commitment to the very thing that Schumpeter and Berlin state that man proudly can do without. Polanyi is therefore not properly subject to the criticism Strauss launches against them.

Conclusions to the First Argument

Let us now review the conclusions of the first argument, and the manner in which for Polanyi they follow from the premises outlined above. The first of these conclusions is that, given the existence of "true human values" and the fact "that people can be motivated by their knowledge of them," "*we have implicitly denied the claim that all human actions can be explained without reference to the exercise of moral judgment*" (33). Sensing that he may not so far have been persuasive, Polanyi provides a gloss: the political scientist acknowledges that the revolutionaries in Hungary acted as they did because they believed that the government had violated a real moral standard. But, Polanyi states, this "leaves open the question *why* they believed this" (33). In reflecting on this question the political scientist, says Polanyi, must allow that one possible answer is a) that moral standards do in fact exist, b) that in conducting fake trials the government violated such standards and hence acted evilly, and c) that the revolutionaries rebelled "*because they knew [such practices] to be evil*" (34). With this foundation, Polanyi then delivers what he conceives to be the decisive blow: "But this cannot be decided without first establishing whether faked trials are in fact evil or not" (34), which would be a moral judgment. From here it is a short distance to Polanyi's second conclusion: "*This value judgment proves indispensable to the political scientist's explanation of their behavior*" (34).

Analysis

Polanyi's repeated use of emphasis in these statements reveals the degree to which he is personally committed to them. It is also an indication of his belief that he has conclusively shown that political science cannot avoid making moral judgments. Does, however, that conclusion in fact follow? Recall that in Polanyi's view the suggestion that political science does not properly engage in moral judgments fails because it entails

inconsistency. In this, the first of Polanyi's arguments, the inconsistency consists of the political scientist at first admitting that he himself (when not acting as a behavioral scientist) makes and is motivated by moral judgments, and then refusing to grant that those he is studying might in their own lives be acting in the same way. But where is the inconsistency? The political scientist admits in his account of human behavior that people make moral judgments and act in light of them. In doing so, however, he does not morally judge the actor's judgment or behavior. Of course, the political scientist may later morally evaluate his own professional practice. He might, for example, decide that he acted well in refraining from evaluation of the judgment and behavior of those he had studied. But this is not to engage in moral judgment of those he is studying.

At this point Polanyi might observe that the political scientist while engaging in moral judgments in his personal life assigns to moral standards a degree of reality that he does not extend to the moral ideals or truths to which the subjects of his study claim to be responding. In explaining his own behavior the political scientist understands the need to acknowledge the authority of these things; when engaging in his behavioral analysis of others, he recognizes no such need (or even, within political science, the possibility). Polanyi is correct in detecting a degree of inconsistency here. But the inconsistency is not crippling, since the political scientist can without embarrassment say that accounting for oneself is a fundamentally different enterprise than is explaining the behavior of others.

In sum, Polanyi's first argument, as stated, fails. There is no debilitating inconsistency when the political scientist admits the importance of moral judgment in his own life and then states that behavioral science is not competent to engage in moral judgments of its own. This is, first, because he can acknowledge the significant role of moral judgments in the lives of his subjects without himself evaluating those judgments or the actions said to follow from them; and, second, because there is no compelling reason why a political scientist must in his professional capacity act in the same way he does in his personal life. Indeed, it is likely that the political scientist would say there are important reasons not to.

Salvation?

Can Polanyi's conclusion nevertheless be rescued? Drawing from his work as a whole, how might this be done?

Polanyi justifiably attributes to the political scientist the understanding that the Hungarian revolutionaries believed in the existence of moral standards and that they were motivated by the conviction that the standards had been violated. But *who* cannot decide that the government's actions are evil "without first establishing whether faked trials are in fact evil or not"? There seems, thus far at least, to be no grounds for insisting that it is the political scientist who must so decide. It may well be that the political scientist cannot account for the behavior of the revolutionary without acknowledging that the actor made a moral judgment in light of (his perception of) moral standards, but this moral judgment, while "indispensable," belongs to the actor, not the political scientist. Polanyi perhaps fares better when we ask a different question: *what* cannot be decided "without first establishing whether faked trials are in fact evil or not"? Polanyi cites two items: 1) that the revolutionaries "were rebelling against a *real evil*," and 2) that they "may have done so *because they knew it to be evil*." If the decider is the revolutionary, then yes, his understanding that his actions are a legitimate reaction to a genuine evil presupposes that he has already established that the government actions were in fact evil. But if the decider is the political scientist (and that, of course, is the relevant case for Polanyi's argument), establishing the factual presence or absence of evil would be a requirement only if his resolving whether the revolutionaries

were responding to an evil known to them entailed that he morally evaluate the governmental measures in question. Everything, however, depends on the phrase “an evil known to them.” We find its origins in Polanyi’s plausible statement that the political scientist needs to allow that the revolutionaries’ belief that the government’s actions were immoral can explain their behavior. He immediately adds that to allow for the effect of such belief leaves open the question of “*why*” the actors so believe. According to Polanyi, the political scientist must concede that one possible answer to this question is what we have just discussed, viz., that the evil was (known to be) real and that the revolutionaries therefore “were rebelling against a *real evil*.” But must the political scientist make this concession? He might instead say that Polanyi is begging the question. Polanyi is asking him to allow indirectly what he (the political scientist) has already directly denied he can competently do—engage as a political scientist in moral judgments. Polanyi might remind the political scientist that he makes such judgments quite regularly in his non-professional life. The latter’s response could well be, “Agreed, but in such instances I am not acting as a political scientist.” For the political scientist, then, while the revolutionaries’ actions can be viewed as a response to evil, such evil is not known by them in the same way as are objects in the world; it is “known” only in the fashion characteristic of fairies and unicorns (or, more charitably, in the fashion characteristic of fine music or good food). Such “knowledge” may indeed account for behavior, but the political scientist is not obligated to assign it the authority called for by Polanyi. Imagine a parallel case: a Native American’s behavior cannot be explained without reference to his “knowledge” of animal spirits, but the anthropologist need not himself know such spirits in order to offer that explanation.

Or, perhaps he does. Polanyi asks us to apply to the political scientist what he says is characteristic of the natural scientist and of perception generally: we must “dwell” in the particulars in order to derive from them their meaning in the form of a phenomenally distinctive whole. He states, “[W]henever we are focusing our attention on a particular object, we are relying for doing so on our awareness of many things to which we are not attending directly at the moment, but which are yet functioning as compelling clues for the way the object of our attention will appear to our senses.”¹⁸ This is the model for science as well: “[A] scientific discovery reduces our focal awareness of observations into a subsidiary awareness of them, by shifting our attention from them to their theoretical coherence.”¹⁹ The same is true for the study of political actors. The political scientist admits that the people he is studying acted in response to their understanding that the Hungarian government violated a moral standard. *That* is the phenomenon to be explained (i.e., made meaningful). But, just as a machine cannot be understood without reference to its principle and function, nor a living organism without reference to its intentions and purposes, the actions of the revolutionary achieve their full meaning only to the degree the investigator participates in his mind. Polanyi states, “We know a chess player’s mind by dwelling in the stratagems of his games and know another man’s pain by dwelling in his face distorted by suffering.”²⁰ It would seem, then, that the revolutionary being studied by the political scientist is satisfactorily understood only if we know something about his mind, and that his mind is to be understood by what he says and does, including the assertion that he is responding to governmental violation of moral standards.²¹ For the investigator in his account to rely exclusively on what is concrete and measurable (Polanyi often uses the term “mathematical”) is to miss that which he has purportedly set out to capture. It is to be blind to the very thing that interests us. One cannot understand a watch or a frog in terms of physics and chemistry, and one cannot fully account for the mind and actions of the revolutionary in terms of “economic necessity, propaganda,” etc.

So, the political scientist’s value judgment “proves indispensable” to his explanation of the revolutionary’s behavior in the same way that the physiologist’s acknowledgment of an organ’s purpose is indispensable to explaining its existence, or the engineer’s reference to the successful operation of a steam engine is indispensable to explaining its nature. The political scientist succeeds in his professed task to the degree that he joins the actor

in surrendering to the reality of moral standards and in experiencing indignation at their violation.²² The anthropologist in our illustration is similarly required to accredit the existence of animal spirits.²³

For Polanyi this is a question of logic. Our understanding of a whole is an inference from the particulars that serve as clues to that whole. (The whole is their meaning.) But, unlike a syllogism, the inference here is not a deduction but instead a tacit integration. That which we are studying, the focus of our attention, is the product of effort and skill. By assembling the clues and dwelling in them, we aim to, and oftentimes do, see a result. This result is a joint meaning not present in the subsidiary clues.

Still, a question persists. Is this dwelling in the mind of the revolutionary equivalent to making a moral judgment? The political scientist cannot actually experience the world in the same way as did the person he is studying. Neither does he replicate his actions, whether that be making a speech or hurling a Molotov cocktail. But this is not what Polanyi need say that the political scientist, if he is to achieve his objective, must do. It is not that the political scientist must himself make the moral judgment but that he must participate in it (make it “present in thought”²⁴)—which, of course, requires that he acknowledge the authority of moral standards and the evil of their violation. He must (through dwelling in the mind of the revolutionary) affirm the existence of moral truth as well as the propensity of men to act in accordance with it. In short, Polanyi would have the political scientist emulate Aristotle who begins his study of politics with the observation that all political action aims for the good. Political life is not to be understood otherwise.

Argument Two: Non-Judgmental Political Science Cannot Understand the Political Scientist Himself

Polanyi’s second argument is simpler than the first. Is it also more successful? Polanyi begins by explicitly declaring that the second argument, like the first, consists of demonstrating “[t]he inconsistency of a science professing that it can explain all human action without making value judgments, while the scientist’s private actions are said to be often motivated by moral motives” (34). We are now, however, to approach the inconsistency from the opposite direction: “If the social scientist can explain all human action by value-free observations, then none of his own actions can claim to be motivated by moral values. Either he exempts himself from his own theory of human motivation, or he must conclude that all reference to moral values—or any other values [including his own]—are meaningless: are empty sounds” (34). What are we to make of this assertion?

The first thing to note is that the response by our hypothetical political scientist to the first argument is not going to succeed with the second. That is, he does not escape Polanyi’s second indictment by saying that he is entitled, or bound, to act differently in his professional capacity as a social scientist than he does in private life. This is because the gravamen of the second argument is not the inconsistency per se but instead that the inconsistency entails a choice between the equally unacceptable alternatives of incoherence (the political scientist exempts himself from his understanding of human nature) and the meaninglessness of his own (and any other) reference to moral values.

What connection exists between Polanyi’s second argument and his original formulation of the primary issue? That is, where in the alleged inconsistency associated with this argument do we find the refusal of behavioral or political science to judge the judgments of the persons it studies as “right or not”?²⁵ In order for this dissatisfaction with behavioral or political science to remain central to the second argument, Polanyi’s “can explain all human action by value-free observations” must mean *can explain all human action without judging*

that action to be right or wrong. This seems plausible, for what after all is a “value-free observation” other than an effort through explanation to capture a phenomenon (in this case human judgment and behavior) without moral judgment of it? But it is important to recognize that acknowledging the existence of moral standards, whether in one’s own life or in that of those one is studying, is entirely compatible with value-free observation. To see a standard, or even to account for someone’s behavior in terms of the impact of that standard, is not to morally judge the standard or the behavior conducted in light of it.

Polanyi’s second argument shares the initial premise of the earlier argument: “All men, whatever their professions, make moral judgments.” (It is the juxtaposition of that premise with the political scientist’s insistence that he can and should avoid value judgments that, according to Polanyi, yields the inconsistency.) But we must again ask, Where is the inconsistency? Let us suppose that our political scientist is also one of the revolutionaries. Presumably, then, in his personal life he recognizes a moral standard that is violated by the government’s actions, and his behavior is motivated by his understanding of and reaction to that violation. In his subsequent political analysis of the Hungarian revolutionaries’ activities (which would of course include his own activity), he refrains from judging their judgments and actions to be right or wrong. His observations are value-free. It does not appear true, however, that the political scientist must then make the choice outlined by Polanyi. His value-free observations, even though they claim to constitute a full explanation of the behavior of the revolutionaries, entail neither that he exclude himself from his analysis nor that his reference to moral values be meaningless. Quite the contrary: recognition of moral standards and men’s propensity to act in light of them is precisely what he is portraying. The political scientist simply does not judge as right or wrong the judgments and actions of those he studies. Polanyi’s argument, as stated, therefore fails.

Conclusion

While Polanyi’s two arguments fare poorly when subjected to careful scrutiny, we saw in the discussion of the first argument that Polanyi’s work taken as a whole does raise serious doubt about the pretensions of non-judgmental political science. But must the issue be forced? Is it possible that either of two explanations—that offered by the passionate actor in the grips of his moral ideals as well as that offered by the non-judgmental observer—satisfactorily accounts for the behavior of the actor? If so, we would reach an acceptable result through two quite different paths.

This, however, does not seem right. The reason for discomfort is stated repeatedly throughout Polanyi’s writings, but is absent from his explicit arguments against non-judgmental social science: as elaborated in the commentary on Polanyi’s initial argument, a vital element of that which the political scientist is examining is missing from his value-free explanation. This is because what the political scientist aims to capture cannot, in two respects, be experienced through the prism of non-judgmental observation. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi states, “According to the logic of commitment, *truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it.* It is then improper to speak of another person’s mental operation as leading to a true proposition in any other sense than that it leads him to something the speaker himself believes to be true.”²⁶ For Polanyi, then, a political scientist does not understand the revolutionary unless he (the political scientist) accredits the truth of the ideal that infuses the actor he is studying.²⁷ The heart of what the political scientist is studying is personal, and the personal is precisely what is overlooked by the non-judgmental approach. Or, to put the matter somewhat differently, everyone concedes that the political scientist is concerned with the facts. But, “[t]o ask what I would believe to be the true facts of a matter, if I were somebody else, means simply to ask what somebody else would believe them to be. This kind of question is interesting...but it is clearly not a question concerning the facts of

the matter.”²⁸ For Polanyi, “the thought of truth implies a desire for it, and is to that extent personal.”²⁹ While that which the revolutionary desires is universal and hence not itself personal, it is available to the political scientist only to the degree that he participates in the personal. This in turn points to the other aspect of the revolutionary actor that cannot be experienced through the non-judgmental approach, namely, the personal responsibility exercised when one commits himself to the truth. One pursues the truth, and accepts the attendant risks, because he understands that he is called to do so. It is in obedience to such a calling that one makes up his mind (and then acts).³⁰ To complete his task, the political scientist must join the revolutionary in perceiving and responding to that calling. This achievement on the part of the political scientist captures the meaning that accounts for the behavior of the revolutionary. It is not, of course, a replication of those actions themselves.

In closing, let us return to the hypothetical non-judgmental political scientist and erstwhile revolutionary. When he conducts his value-free observations, he emerges as a schizoid personality. To the degree that he remains in his account of political life oblivious to the personal dimension of the revolutionary (to his commitment to moral standards, to the standards’ perceived authority, to the call to submit and respond, to the risk he is willing to run in the name of the standards, etc.), he becomes someone other than the revolutionary, and hence is split in two. And, just as our revolutionary when acting as a value-free observer overlooks something vital about himself, so too does the non-judgmental political scientist ignore a central fact about those he is studying (while remaining inattentive to that same element in his own life). But such inconsistency on the part of the non-judgmental political scientist is not, as alleged by Polanyi, in and of itself disabling. While such an approach to the study of political action is indeed flawed, this is for reasons other than those found in Polanyi’s formal arguments against non-judgmental political science. In his account of moral deliberation and the pursuit of moral truth, Polanyi succeeds where these two arguments fail.

Appendix

Below are Polanyi’s two arguments against non-judgmental political science. They occur on pages 33-34 of the article. An endnote is omitted. All emphasis is Polanyi’s.

[T]his doctrine can be proved to be inconsistent by two complementary arguments, one starting from the existence of the scientist as a moral agent (outside the range, as he alleges, of his scientific activity) and examining the implications of his (extra-scientific) moral judgments for the statements he makes as a scientist; the other moving from his allegedly value-free scientific pronouncements to his (extra-scientific) moral judgments.

The first argument is as follows: (1) All men, whatever their professions, make moral judgments. (2) When we claim that an action of ours is prompted by moral motives, or else when we make moral judgments of others. . . we invariably refer to moral standards *which we hold to be valid*. Our submission to a standard has universal intent. . . our appeal to moral standards necessarily claims to be *right*, that is, binding on all men. (3) Such a claim entails a distinction between *moral truth* and *moral illusion*. (4) This distinction in turn entails a distinction between two types of motivation. The awareness of moral truth is founded on the recognition of a valid claim, which can be reasonably argued for and supported by evidence; moral illusion, in contrast, is compulsive, like a sensory illusion. (5) Thus once we admit, as we do when we acknowledge the existence anywhere of valid moral judgments, that true human values exist and that people can be motivated by their knowledge of them, *we have implicitly denied the claim that all human*

actions can be explained without reference to the exercise of moral judgment. For to observe...that the Hungarian writers rebelled against the practice of faked trials because they *believed* this practice to be wrong, leaves open the question *why* they believed this. If true human values exist, the Hungarians may not have been driven by economic necessity, propaganda, or any other compulsion; they may have been rebelling against a *real evil*, and may have done so *because they knew it to be evil*. But this cannot be decided without first establishing whether faked trials are in fact evil or not. Therefore: (6) *This value judgment proves indispensable to the political scientist's explanation of their behavior.*

The inconsistency of a science professing that it can explain all human action without making value judgments, while the scientist's private actions are said to be often motivated by moral motives, can be more simply demonstrated the other way round. If the social scientist can explain all human action by value-free observations, then none of his own actions can claim to be motivated by moral values. Either he exempts himself from his own theory of human motivation, or he must conclude that all reference to moral values—or any other values—are meaningless: are empty sounds.

Endnotes

¹Michael Polanyi, "The Message of the Hungarian Revolution," in *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, Marjorie Grene, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 24-39. (The quotation is from page 33.) The appendix to the present paper contains the text of Polanyi's arguments.

²Polanyi adds that the moral illusion is "compulsive." But compulsion is not in and of itself problematic. The important question is the source of the compulsion: "While compulsion by force or by neurotic obsession excludes responsibility, compulsion by universal intent establishes responsibility." This observation is from *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974; first published in 1958), 309. See, too, page 313: "[T]he effort of reaching out to reality involves...compulsion of oneself to make oneself conform to reality." Polanyi later refers to this as "self-compulsion" (318) and says that compulsion is the subjective aspect of our participation in knowing, where such participation is "personal" (324).

³See the appendix.

⁴Michael Polanyi, "Logic and Psychology," *American Psychologist*, 23 (1968), 28-29.

⁵*Ibid.*, 29.

⁶Cf. "The Unaccountable Element in Science," in *Knowing and Being*, 119: "Strictly speaking, the premises of science are today what the discoveries of tomorrow will reveal them to be." Polanyi later adds, "[T]he greatness of a discovery lies in its fruitfulness" (*ibid.*).

⁷"The Logic of Tacit Inference," in *Knowing and Being*, 138. See, too, *Personal Knowledge*: "[A]s there is no rule to tell us at the moment of deciding on the next step in research what is truly bold and what merely reckless, there is none either for distinguishing between doubt which will curb recklessness and thus qualify as true caution, and doubt which cripples boldness and will stand condemned as unimaginative dogmatism" (277, emphasis added). In a similar vein, Polanyi earlier states, "Some of these doubts may turn out one day to have been as wanton, as bigoted and dogmatic as those of which we have now been cured" (275). We do not and cannot know now. The matter will become clear only in retrospect. Cf. 285.

⁸See, for example, "Tacit Knowing: Its Bearing on Some Problems of Philosophy," in *Knowing and Being*, 171.

⁹*Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰*Personal Knowledge*, 320.

¹¹The most important measure of being right is whether the belief is consistent with reality. For Polanyi belief is a conjecture (as well as a personal commitment) “in search of a valid result” (322). He observes that “if time could be suspended” we would see that at any given moment our reasons for belief are not “wholly specifiable” and must therefore be “objectively inadequate” (320). Especially noteworthy in Polanyi’s reference to suspended time is the implicit admission that reasons for belief (or disbelief) continue to arise indefinitely. The question of truth, theoretically at least, is never closed.

¹²Readers familiar with *Personal Knowledge* will in the case of the ancient Incan be reminded of Polanyi’s extended discussion of the “conceptual framework” of the primitive African people known as the Azande (see 287-294). Ranking among the most intriguing analyses offered in the book, this discussion issues in the following startling claim: “I conclude that what earlier philosophers have alluded to by speaking of coherence as the criterion of truth is only a criterion of *stability*. It may equally stabilize an erroneous or a true view of the universe. The attribution of truth to any particular stable alternative is a fiduciary act which cannot be analysed in non-committal terms...[T]here exists no principle of doubt the operation of which will discover for us which of two systems of implicit beliefs is true—except in the sense that we will admit decisive evidence against the one we do not believe to be true, and not against the other. Once more, the admission of doubt proves here to be as clearly an act of belief as does the non-admission of doubt” (294). While Polanyi’s use of the terms “erroneous” and “true” clearly indicates that he does not subscribe to epistemological relativism (he also earlier states that “Azande are quite wrong when [selectively pointing to facts] for protecting their superstitions”), some readers will nonetheless be apt to understand him in such a fashion. Perhaps fearing this reaction, Polanyi later returns to the Azande (318-319) to say that while their witch doctor “is clearly a rational person, his rationality is altogether deluded...[A]s an interpretation of natural experience [his intellectual system] is false” (318). The distinction between error and truth becomes clear as we “strive for a more correct experience” (319).

¹³This is the title of Chapter 5, Section 8 of *Personal Knowledge*. Extended examination of the “educated mind” promises to unlock the whole of Polanyi’s thought.

¹⁴One such statement occurs on p. 280 of *Personal Knowledge*: “[I]t is part of the Christian faith that its striving can never reach an endpoint at which, having gained its desired result, its continuation would become unnecessary. A Christian who reached his spiritual endpoint in this life would have ceased to be a Christian.” Cf. 199 as well as the final sentence in the book.

¹⁵Strauss’s analysis is contained in the essay “‘Relativism’” (the title is enclosed in quotation marks), which may be found in Thomas L. Pangle, ed., *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13-26.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸“The Unaccountable Element in Science,” 113.

¹⁹“The Logic of Tacit Inference,” 140.

²⁰“The Structure of Consciousness,” in *Knowing and Being*, 215.

²¹ See *Personal Knowledge*, 312: A person’s mind “is the focus which we look at by attending subsidiarily to the utterances and actions unспецифически co-ordinated by his mind.”

²²“Joining the actor” is ambiguous, and the ambiguity raises an important question. In the first sense of “join,” the political scientist recognizes *now* (as he observes) what the actor recognized or is recognizing. Actor and observer have in common a sense of immediacy as well as the compulsion mentioned in note 2 above. In the second sense of “join,” the political scientist’s observation is informed (i.e. made accurate and comprehensive) through the effect of a recognition *that occurred in the past*. Under the first conception, the political scientist shares the actor’s passion; under the second, the political scientist is able accurately to understand due to the

effect of a passion that existed at an earlier time. There are those (one thinks, for example, of Machiavelli) that would regard the absence of passion to be an important asset in political calculation, and essential to effectiveness. Even for Classical philosophy a distancing from immediate passion (a bracketing via philosophical ascent) would be a sign of superior character. Polanyi, however, consistently argues to the contrary: some things are simply not to be understood in the absence of passion. The highest possibilities are realized only through wholeheartedly (and presently) giving oneself to them. Memory is not enough.

²³See “The Logic of Tacit Inference,” 150-151: “[O]ur perception of living beings consists largely in mentally duplicating the active coordinations performed by their function. To this extent our knowledge of life is a sharing of life—a re-living, a very intimate kind of indwelling.”

²⁴“Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading” in *Knowing and Being*, 189.

²⁵See the opening paragraph of the present paper.

²⁶*Personal Knowledge*, 305.

²⁷Does this mean that the political scientist must always concur with the actor that he is studying? The answer is “no.” But, in order to grasp what is to be evaluated, the observer must, like the actor, personally participate in it. The participation is provisional (albeit wholehearted). The political scientist, no less than the actor, subsequently can and ought to be open to confirming and contradictory evidence.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 316. Among the facts to be known are the ideals or values perceived by the actor under study. Polanyi, in other words, denies the fact/value distinction.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 308.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 324. See the entire section, entitled “Acceptance of Calling,” on 321-324.

Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. MLA or APA style is preferred. Because the journal serves English writers across the world, we do not require anybody’s “standard English.” Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered. Consistency and clear writing are expected. Manuscripts normally will be sent out for blind review. Authors are expected to provide an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment.

Phil Mullins
MWSU
St. Joseph, MO 64507
Phone: (816) 244-2612
Fax (816) 271-5680
mullins@missouriwestern.edu

Walter Gulick
MSU, Billings
Billings, MT 59101
Phone: (406) 259-3622
Fax (406) 657-2187
WGulick@msubillings.edu