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# Tradition & Discovery

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## Submission Guidelines

Submissions: All manuscripts should be submitted as a Microsoft Word file attached to an email message. **Articles** should be no more than 6000 words in length (inclusive of keywords, abstract, notes, and references) and sent to Paul Lewis at lewis\_pa@mercer.edu. All submissions will be sent out for blind peer review. **Book reviews** should be no more than 1000 words in length and sent to Andrew Grosso at atgrosso@icloud.com.

Spelling: We recognize that the journal serves English-speaking writers around the world and so do not require anyone's "standard" English spelling. We do, however, require all writers to be consistent in whatever convention they follow.

Citations:

- Our preference is for Chicago's parenthetical/reference style in which citations are given in the text as (last name of author year, page number), combined with full bibliographical information at the end of the article. One exception is that Polanyi's major works may be cited parenthetically using the following abbreviations (with abbreviations italicized):

*CF* *Contempt of Freedom*

*KB* *Knowing and Being*

*LL* *Logic of Liberty*

*M* *Meaning*

*PK* *Personal Knowledge*

*SEP* *Society, Economics, and Philosophy*

*SFS* *Science, Faith, and Society*

*SM* *Study of Man*

*STSR* *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*

*TD* *Tacit Dimension*

For example: Polanyi argues that .... (TD, 56). Full bibliographical information should still be supplied in the references section since many of us may work with different editions of his works.

- Endnotes should be used sparingly and be placed before the reference section.
- We do recognize that Polanyi's work connects with scholars who work in diverse disciplines that use different style guides. To the extent that our software allows, we will accept other styles (e.g., APA or MLA) so long as the author is consistent and careful in following it. The main point, of course, is to give the reader enough information to locate and engage your sources. Manuscripts that are not careful and consistent in style will be returned so that the author can make corrections, which may delay publication.

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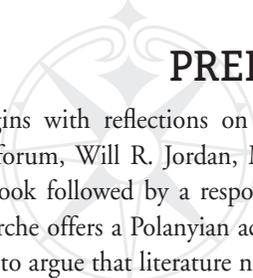
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## PREFACE

This issue begins with reflections on Mark Mitchell's new book, *The Limits of Liberalism*. In our forum, Will R. Jordan, Matthew D. Sandwisch, and Colin Cordner comment on the book followed by a response from Mitchell. In addition, an essay by Jean-Baptiste Lamarche offers a Polanyian account of psychoanalysis. Lyndsay Atnip uses Polanyian concepts to argue that literature not only evokes meaning, but provides knowledge of human realities. Finally, Walter Gulick provides a short discussion identifying three different ways that people talk about emergence.

As always go to the [www.polanyisociety.org](http://www.polanyisociety.org) to check the latest developments in the online News and Notes.

Remember, too, that dues for the Society were due last December. If dues are not current, it's never too late to catch up.

*Paul Lewis*

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# REFLECTIONS ON *THE LIMITS OF LIBERALISM*

Mark T. Mitchell, *The Limits of Liberalism: Tradition, Individualism, and the Crisis of Freedom*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018. 340 pp. \$55.00.

**Keywords:** Mark T. Mitchell, Michael Polanyi, Alexis de Tocqueville, liberalism, tradition, epistemology, autonomous self, democracy, Will R. Jordan, Matthew Sandwisch, Colin Cordner, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Oakeshott, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Edmund Burke

## ABSTRACT

*Three reviewers summarize and analyze Mark Mitchell's latest book on liberalism and tradition. Mitchell then responds.*



## LAND OF THE LOST

**Will R. Jordan**

Nobody knows. What good's an opinion if you don't know? My grandfather knew the number of whiskers in the Almighty's beard. I don't even know what happened yesterday, let alone tomorrow. He knew what it was that makes a rock or a table. I don't even understand the formula that says nobody knows. We've got nothing to go on—got no way to think about things.

John Steinbeck, *Travels With Charlie* (1962)

Steinbeck's Yankee farmer describes our plight in a way that perfectly complements Mark T. Mitchell's thesis about the epistemological crisis that threatens modern liberal societies. According to Mitchell, contemporary liberalism is based on a fundamentally false conception of the human person. The liberal ideal of the autonomous self—"unconstrained, unattached, and absolutely free" (23)—fails to account for, and indeed actively rejects, the indispensable role that tradition plays in human life.

Although Mitchell's impressive book focuses primarily on the epistemological costs and philosophical incoherence embedded in the liberal rejection of tradition, it is clearly animated by a concern for the social and political effects that emerge once liberalism becomes triumphant. Foremost among these social and political effects is the tendency of liberalism to devolve into its opposite: a coercive and intolerant illiberalism which recognizes no limits to the exercise of power. Mitchell sees this tendency at work in a number of contemporary political controversies, from the threats to freedom of speech emanating from the halls of academia, to the nationalistic and reactionary political movements emerging in the most advanced liberal democracies. To check these trends, Mitchell offers his readers a sketch of a possible alternative to modern liberalism. Mitchell argues that his "humane localism," rooted in tradition and based on a richer conception of the human person, provides a more stable and sustainable liberty than does the prevailing liberal model.

In advancing his claims, Mitchell anchors each step of his argument in an analysis of a particular thinker. The book therefore ranges widely and helpfully across the history of philosophy—a methodology which seems especially appropriate for an argument about the importance of tradition. After an initial survey of the early modern founders of liberalism and cosmopolitanism, Mitchell narrows his focus to two key seventeenth-century figures, Francis Bacon and René Descartes. In Bacon's defense of experimental science, Mitchell identifies a strong rejection of received authorities and opinions, most notably the prevailing Aristotelian tradition. He also finds in Bacon's *New Atlantis* an early warning about the loss of political liberty that might emerge from the scientists' project of total dominance over nature (35). Descartes' philosophy offers, if possible, an even clearer rejection of tradition as a source of authority, as he (in) famously calls for doubting everything that is not clear and distinct to the individual's own mind. Mitchell fairly recognizes the political implications of this method, as it is both radically individualistic and egalitarian. Mitchell ends this section by enlisting the aid of Alexis de Tocqueville, who not only identified both Bacon and Descartes as important contributors to the modern democratic project and its rejection of tradition, but also foresaw how democratic individualism could lead, seemingly paradoxically, to novel forms of centralization and despotism. While Mitchell is very sympathetic to Tocqueville's account, he sees his project as somewhat different. Mitchell wants to focus first on the epistemological incoherence of liberalism, rather than on its political effects. Mitchell clearly thinks the latter problems are simply derivative of the former. We'll return below to the question of whether Mitchell should be so confident in framing matters this way.

At the center of the book are three chapters dedicated to twentieth-century thinkers who, despite their differences, recognize that modern liberalism's assault on tradition undermines our ability to really know and understand the world in which we live. Mitchell gives his readers a careful and helpful analysis of the philosophy of

Michael Oakeshott, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Polanyi. These three share a concern that the modern ideal of an objective, neutral, purely rational mind, free from all vestiges of traditional practices and beliefs, is nothing but a misleading illusion. In all three accounts, real knowing looks more like apprenticeship in a set of traditional practices than it looks like the solitary mastery of a technique, as Bacon or Descartes would have it. We are necessarily embedded in a tradition just as we are embedded in language, and cannot comprehend or articulate any truth free of that framework, no matter our rationalist pretensions. Mitchell is attentive to the fine points of difference in these three thinkers, and readers especially interested in epistemology or in a clear introduction to one or more of the three philosophers would do well to study these chapters in some detail. One point worth noting here is that Mitchell clearly prefers MacIntyre and Polanyi to Oakeshott, as the former pair root knowledge in traditional practices and beliefs without falling prey to relativism. Both think particular traditions can be better or worse at describing a reality that exists independently of humanity, even though we have no non-traditional way of accessing that reality (193-197). In sum, Mitchell attempts here to describe a middle way between the ambitious, but ultimately false, certainty of enlightenment rationalism and the nihilistic banality of postmodern relativism. This middle way is grounded in the recovery of tradition as a source of knowledge.

In the final sections of the book, Mitchell turns again to the political and social consequences of liberalism's crisis—especially the tendency for liberalism to fall into illiberalism by eschewing limits and demanding ideological homogeneity (213) as well as the related social pathologies (including declining birthrates, rising public and private debt, and environmental degradation) that follow from liberalism's inherently self-centered and short-sighted conception of the human person (214-17). Instead of returning to what he calls "first wave liberalism"—the liberalism of the American founding, in which liberalism's worst excesses are counterbalanced by pre-modern elements in the surrounding culture, and which he finds to be ultimately unstable—Mitchell calls for a more ambitious project "to imagine a nonliberal conception of liberty, one that does not depend on the myth of the liberal self" (218). The "tradition-constituted liberty" that emerges here is drawn primarily from the thought of Edmund Burke, but represents part of a tradition that Mitchell traces back to Augustine and forward to the twentieth-century in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Mitchell's proposed alternative to liberalism, which he describes as "humane localism," recognizes the inherent limits on politics imposed by our natural human limits, instills a new sense of duty and obligation that comes with our rootedness in particular communities, and resuscitates the ideas of providence, vocation, and stewardship (266-67). Mitchell provides the most concise description of this vision when he writes, "humane localism is rooted in respect, not in homogeneity, in love of one's traditions, not hatred of other traditions,

in a recognition that liberty is sustainable only with limits, and in the realization that human flourishing is best realized in the company of friends and neighbors sharing a common place in the world” (268).

As attractive as this vision is—and I think there is much to recommend it—we should not lose sight of the fact that the book’s primary purposes are to identify the epistemological errors inherent in the liberal conception of the human person and to attribute the source of our contemporary political crises to these errors. The description of “humane localism” is merely sketched out at the end of the book as a possible alternative to liberalism—an alternative that embraces rather than undermines tradition. Acknowledging this limitation, the book certainly succeeds in its primary purposes. I have encountered no recent account more plausible than Mitchell’s when it comes to identifying the underlying incoherence of the dominant liberal worldview.

However, as I am required here to offer some thoughts which might lead to further discussion, I will advance three lines of argument that I hope will be worth addressing. First, taking Tocqueville as my guide, I question whether the modern abandonment of tradition is simply the result of bad philosophy, or whether it is a natural consequence of democratic equality itself. If the latter, it seems the problem is much too deeply rooted to be addressed in any incremental, or Burkean, way. Second, I question whether our traditions (including elements which Mitchell clearly would like to resuscitate into his “humane localism”) are not in some way implicated in bringing us to the current crisis. In other words, how can we clearly identify and separate the good in our traditions from the harmful? Finally, although I am somewhat sympathetic to the critique of enlightenment rationalism and abstract theory offered by Oakeshott, MacIntyre, and Polanyi, I wonder whether the clarity it seeks to provide hasn’t sometimes proven to be indispensable in informing and correcting our sometimes murky and conflicting traditions.

To the first point, Mitchell rightly credits Tocqueville with recognizing how liberal democratic people exhibit a tendency to reject authority and tradition. America, for Tocqueville, was “the one country in the world where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed” (Tocqueville 1992, 403). Yet while Tocqueville does acknowledge the influence of Bacon and Descartes in formalizing the method used to batter down traditional beliefs, he also emphasizes that democratic people come to this method untaught. The democratic social state “naturally disposes their minds to adopt [the maxims of Descartes],” because they no longer feel the importance of aristocratic family bonds or class bonds, and “not perceiving in anyone among themselves incontestable signs of greatness and superiority, are constantly led back toward their own reason as the most visible and closest source of truth” (Tocqueville 1992, 403-404). In other words, people in a democratic social state are fundamentally unwilling to submit themselves to an authority or master (in the manner of an apprentice), which Mitchell

argues is necessary for the transmission of tradition (73,124). There is indeed an epistemological problem according to Tocqueville, but it is one inseparable from, and driven by, democracy's equality of conditions.

At times, Mitchell seems to acknowledge this problem, as when he notes that "such notions as submission, trust, and the decided nonegalitarianism entailed in the relationship between a master and a student are concepts that find little favor in a world that celebrates the liberal self along with epistemic independence" (125). However, if the source of the problem is democratic equality itself, it will not be solved by simply improving our philosophy or our understanding of the human person. Tocqueville is remarkably modest about how much change is possible in democratic ages, and recognizes that "we ought not to strain to make ourselves like our fathers, but strive to attain the kind of greatness and happiness that is proper to us" (Tocqueville 1992, 675). In this context, I wonder whether Mitchell's "humane localism" is attached to democracy, in which case it might have little effect, or not so attached, in which case it attempts a decidedly non-Burkean transformation of our now-traditional social state.

My second concern has to do with the difficulty inherent in the complexity of our traditions. Mitchell gives good reasons for preferring a new, "tradition-constituted liberty" to "first wave liberalism," as the acid of liberalism eventually eats away at all pre-liberal checks. What if it is the case, however, that even parts of the tradition that Mitchell would include in his "humane localism" have a tendency to contribute to liberalism? For example, Tocqueville sees the protestant reformation as a step prior to even Bacon and Descartes in the overthrowing of traditional beliefs (Tocqueville 1992, 404). Mitchell himself begins his chapter on the denigration of tradition by noting the influence of Martin Luther (25). If we're tempted to think that pre-Reformation Christianity might avoid these problems, Oakeshott suggests that even the early Church contributed to a non-traditional form of moral perfectionism. The abridgement of "Christian habits and customs into a creed that could be translated across cultural and linguistic boundaries produced a morality corresponding to this change. Rather than emphasizing habits and customs rooted in a tradition, moral ideas were abstracted from the original traditional behavior" (179). Polanyi then elaborates how this more simple Christian idea of moral perfection was appropriated by the skeptical rationalists to disastrous effect (170-71). One suspects that Christianity even contributed to the growth of cosmopolitanism over localism, which Mitchell decries, even though his account of its development skips from the Stoics to Immanuel Kant (12).

None of this is to deny Mitchell's contention that Christianity can be a powerful and beneficial force for counteracting the worst excesses of liberalism, but it simply raises the question of whether we are ever capable of bringing with us only the purest and most helpful parts of our tradition, without including the problematic and even contradictory bits. Mitchell addresses this question, at least with respect to Christianity,

in Chapter 5, but he here focuses on revitalizing three main theological insights which he finds most useful (251). Even if we grant that modernity has deformed Christianity in ways not salutary and therefore we must revive a more pure and true form, we are left to wonder whether any of our traditions can be disentangled fully from the whole, including those elements which ultimately spawned liberalism and cosmopolitanism.

Finally, I want to raise a point that springs from Mitchell's admirable defense of a traditionalism that takes seriously the reality of the world. Mitchell largely supports the "tradition of classical realism [which] holds that all things are imbued with a nature that they share with other similar things. Humans, too, have a nature, and to flourish is to live in conformity with the limits and ends indicated by that nature" (256). If this is true, it suggests that some traditions come closer than others to perceiving and reflecting this reality. Mitchell does a fine job of explaining, in the thought of MacIntyre and Polanyi, how such distinctions are made. That said, it seems evident that enlightenment rationalism—despite all of the problems Mitchell's book identifies—can sometimes come closer (even if not completely or wholly satisfactorily) to illuminating the reality of nature than does reliance upon faulty tradition. To take two examples of the same liberal enlightenment philosophy, we can look at the doctrine of natural rights as applied in 1776 by the American founders and in the 1850s and 1860s by Abraham Lincoln. Especially in the latter case, it is difficult to imagine how the mere traditionalist wouldn't side with Stephen A. Douglas and his defense of popular sovereignty. Even though Lincoln's doctrine of natural rights was an abstract rule, what Oakshott would dismiss as a crib or an abridgement, it was a powerful tool for illuminating the moral reality of the situation. (Of course, Lincoln wasn't dismissive of tradition, as he took great pains to show he was more loyal to the spirit of the Founding than were his opponents. See, for example his February, 1860 "Cooper Union Address." Lincoln's First Inaugural Address also famously invokes the "mystic chords of memory" in a way totally incompatible with the idea of the liberal, autonomous self.) If, then, there are better and worse traditions, as well as rationalist doctrines that conform more and less closely to reality, I'm not convinced we've solved our epistemological problems by simply preferring the former to the latter.

In the end, Mitchell's book is a welcome reminder that our contemporary political dysfunction goes very deep, perhaps as far as a fundamental incoherence in the way modern people think about their place in the world. If indeed we find ourselves in the situation of Steinbeck's Yankee farmer—lost with no map and no clear sense of direction—we do well to retrace our steps to see where we went wrong. Mitchell's work here, on the epistemic necessity of tradition, is an excellent place to start.

## Reference

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## RECOVERING TRADITION

**Matthew D. Sandwisch**

Michael Polanyi's turn from science to philosophy was occasioned by social, political, and moral concerns. He developed his philosophy out of an acute desire to diagnose and understand the ills of his age. He writes, "It seemed to me then that our whole civilization was pervaded by the dissonance of an extreme critical lucidity and an intense moral conscience, and that this combination had generated both our tight-lipped modern revolutions and the tormented self-doubt of modern man outside revolutionary movements. So I resolved to inquire into the roots of this condition."<sup>1</sup> Of course, his philosophy seeks to do much more than this: It seeks to give an alternative account of knowing and alter the modern and mistaken conception of ourselves and the way we relate to the world. To ignore the moral and political dimension of Polanyi's thought is to fundamentally misunderstand it.

This, I am happy to say, is something that Mark Mitchell does not do in his recent book. Like Polanyi, Mitchell seeks to understand a political crisis: "The land of the free seems to be grappling with the meaning of its freedom, and some are finding that there is a world of difference between paying lip service to noble ideals such as liberty, tolerance, and self-control and actually doing the hard work of living up to those ideals" (x). His book is a response to our polarized political moment. It seeks to understand it, as well as to move past the stalemate. The crux of the problem is the conflicting moral convictions of various parties and their alleged allegiance to values like liberty and tolerance. Mitchell sees this political problem as stemming from our degradation of tradition. Mitchell's analysis focuses on the relation of liberalism with tradition. For Mitchell, the autonomous individual, "independent and free from any obligations that have not been expressly chosen" is the ideal type of liberalism (2). This ideal individual is freed from tradition. But the autonomous individual is a liberal fiction. He does not exist; indeed he cannot exist. His existence is a logical impossibility.

Mitchell is careful to distinguish between three types of tradition. There is first the tradition that functions as an epistemic necessity for all knowing; second, the tradition that is the great conversation of the Western tradition; and third, the various local and folk traditions throughout the world. It is the first type of tradition that is the focus of Mitchell's argument for it is the epistemic role of tradition that liberalism denies, and which leads to the further denial of the second and third senses of tradition (22).

The bulk of Mitchell's book is an examination of the role of the epistemic role of tradition in the thought of Michael Oakshott, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael

Polanyi. Since my space is limited, and my knowledge of Oakeshott is severely limited, I shall concentrate on Mitchell's use of Polanyi. It should be no surprise to readers of Polanyi that Mitchell finds him a helpful asset and ally in his defense of tradition in Mitchell's first sense. Indeed, his treatment of Polanyi seems to be the culmination of his discussion of tradition. Polanyi is the last figure he treats, even though MacIntyre is chronologically more recent. He spends 64 pages discussing Polanyi as compared to 36 for Oakeshott and 38 for MacIntyre. In comparing the thinkers to each other, Mitchell argues that Polanyi's realism allows him to avoid the moral relativism that Oakeshott's thought seems to lead (181). He also sees more agreement between MacIntyre and Polanyi (despite MacIntyre's statements to the contrary), though Polanyi more strongly emphasizes the role of unformalizable knowledge. Tacit knowing, more than anything else, shows the importance of tradition as the "from" in which all our thinking and acting necessarily is rooted. Aside from comparing Polanyi to these other thinkers, the bulk of Mitchell's chapter on Polanyi is an exposition of his thought. Mitchell carefully and methodically summarizes Polanyi's thought in a straightforward and simple manner. His exposition covers and explains Polanyi's conception of tacit knowledge, tradition, realism, and moral inversion. I can easily imagine myself recommending this chapter to a novice of Polanyi's thought as a fine and thorough introduction to his thought.

Mitchell's final chapter appropriates the views of Oakeshott, MacIntyre, and Polanyi in furthering his own critique of liberalism as well as sketching the humane localism that he sees as its remedy. In true Polanyian fashion, Mitchell admits that these "three thinkers would not necessarily approve of the way [he] interpret[s] their thought or the way [he applies] their ideas to the liberal self" (199). He sees himself as participating in a tradition in which these three thinkers form part of the subsidiary background of his own thinking. I don't have enough space to explore everything that Mitchell does in this chapter, but I would like to note what for me was the most enlightening and thought-provoking moment—his distinction, taken from Jaroslav Pelikan, of tradition as icon and tradition as idol:

An icon is a particular embodiment of a universal truth. An icon points beyond itself to the real and the universal, which is the goal of knowledge, yet it is something we can never attain without the mediation of particulars. When we cease to see tradition as an icon, when instead we focus upon the tradition as an end in itself, the icon becomes an idol. The aspiration to grasp the reality beyond the particularities of the specific tradition is the mark of a healthy approach to tradition. An idol, on the other hand, purports to embody truth in itself. It becomes an object of worship that misdirects the affections. When traditions become idols, they lose their ability to adapt

to changing circumstances. They become objects of veneration—or a means of control—rather than the means of encountering truth (201-202).

I've come across this distinction in religious contexts but have never thought to apply it to different forms of tradition. I find it an important and helpful distinction to make, and have already found it influencing my own thinking.

I have two main criticisms of the book. My first worry is that his view of liberalism might be overly simplistic. Mitchell breaks liberalism into first wave and second wave forms, but it might be better to see liberalism as a more complex reaction to a series of concrete social, political and economic forces. Much of the history of liberalism is not a quest for some abstract freedom, but rather a quest for a freedom from a very particular and oppressing constraint at a particular point of time. The history of liberalism can be seen as a series of consecutive reactions to perceived constraints. When new freedoms are achieved, new constraints are felt. As more and more freedoms are achieved, newer freedoms begin to conflict with older freedoms. Many of the incoherencies of liberalism stem from the conflicts between these various freedoms. Liberalism has no good method of ordering and resolving conflicts between various freedoms.

I suspect that Mitchell largely agrees with all I have said, and hope that I am not perceived as nitpicking. A great deal of simplification is necessary in a book of this sort. I would just have liked to see more of an admission to the many complexities and historical contingencies of liberalism. Part of the problem is that liberalism is a contested term. Different supporters of liberalism have different conceptions of it (e.g. classical vs. progressive), just as its detractors do. These different understandings of liberalism are dependent on what one is for, or what one is against. One cannot fully understand liberalism without recognizing the polemical and emotional force of the term. Furthermore, why shouldn't we see liberalism as a tradition? Mitchell seems to admit that liberalism is a tradition when he writes "liberalism has become an idol rather than an icon, an ideology rather than a set of ideals to be balanced against other equally vital ideals" (214). This statement invites many questions. When did liberalism become an idol rather than an icon? If liberalism became an idol, then it would seem that it was once an icon. But if liberalism was once an icon where did it go wrong? Mitchell argues that the incoherencies within liberalism were there from the beginning, and thus it had to go wrong. But is this true? Aren't there always incoherencies within a tradition? The incoherencies of a tradition are often what prompt it forward to achieve greater coherency. Could the liberal tradition have made a proper place for tradition? Or was liberalism an idol from the beginning?<sup>2</sup>

My second criticism concerns Mitchell's use of Polanyi. As I made clear above, I believe that Mitchell is a very good expositor of Polanyi's thought. But I would have liked to see Mitchell analyze the current events he cites at the beginning of the book

through Polanyian terms. For example, Mitchell spends four pages discussing moral inversion. It would be interesting to see if Polanyi's conception of moral inversion can make sense of and illuminate any of the contemporary events that Mitchell cites in his preface. Can moral inversion help shed light on the election of Donald Trump or Brexit? What about the crisis of academic freedom as exemplified by Charles Murray at Middlebury College? How is moral inversion related to tradition? Can tradition as idol lead to moral inversion? How might spurious moral inversion be at play within the liberal tradition? Perhaps this is outside of the scope of the book. But these are questions I found myself asking again and again.

In the preface, Mitchell states that what he has to say "is not new," and that his goal is "to remind those who have forgotten some basic and indispensable truths" (x). I think Mitchell's assessment of his book is correct: there is not much that is novel and new in it. Some might see this as a flaw. I see it as a necessary, yet thankless, task. The task of reminding ourselves of our dependence, our situatedness, our embeddedness, our reliance on the epistemic role of our knowing, is a relentless one. We so easily forget, even those of us who know better. Despite the critique of Oakeshott, MacIntyre, Polanyi, and also thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, amongst many others, a false picture still holds us captive. May we continually be reminded of what we have forgotten until the spell is at last broken.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* with a New Foreward by Amartya Sen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>2</sup>Much of this criticism is indebted to conversations with and a class I took with David Corey at Baylor University. See his "Liberalism and the Modern Quest for Freedom," forthcoming in Leslie Marsh, ed., *Reclaiming Liberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).



## TRADITION AND RECOLLECTION

**Colin Cordner**

There is much to be admired about Mark T. Mitchell's new book, *The Limits of Liberalism*. It is a tome in which the great weight of many a great man's original and divergent thoughts has been exposed to clarity, comparison, and mutual elucidation. It is an invaluable map to the hoar-bitter and contentious halls of that much abused realm called Tradition. It is a engaging investigation into that realm of the unspoken and inarticulate which is too often derided in ignorance.

Much to be admired, and, of course, some to be critiqued. But we do not come to praise Caesar, nor to bury him, nor even to soliloquize. Rather, we shall, I hope deliberate and discuss some matters which spring to light at Professor Mitchell's prompting. It is a fine thing, I believe, to begin by praising what is fine in Mitchell's work, and then to do the respect of contending what is contentious.

The book proceeds in seven parts, if we include the introduction and epilogue. The five meaty middle parts of the book comprise the main sustenance. The two bookends supply the commentary, definitions, and reflections which both motivate the monograph and give it logical structure. If I may paraphrase, Mitchell's main contention is that liberalism and the modern mindset which reflects it, are definable by their unhealthy war on or lack of healthy relationship with tradition. In order to clarify the point, Mitchell helpfully introduces an outline of the philosophic skepticisms of Francis Bacon and René Descartes, who serves as paradigms and progenitors of the new attitude.

Within a chapter, Mitchell quite handily describes the differences between Bacon's experimental or empirical skepticism and Descartes' rationalist or transcendentalist skepticism (those terms being my own shorthand). Of equal or greater import to the summaries is the author's main point. That both men's explicit theoretical positions dovetail with practices which they prescribe in order to unburden oneself of superstition, error, and the idols of the mind. Said practices themselves entail a necessary attitude of doubt or hostility to received opinions and to the intellectual frameworks in which we are naturally, and largely a-critically enculturated.

It matters not, then, that Bacon proposes to overcome error and to enhance the powers of perception and reasoning through experimental method. Nor does it matter that Descartes proposes a method of transcending the errors of the senses and opinions through a form of rationalistic transcendental meditation. Rather, it is the radicalism of the critical disposition towards all but certain and indubitable knowledge which is

of import. Said attitude, in both skeptics' works, is explicitly aimed at the Aristotelian and Scholastic traditions of medieval Europe. It implies also the proposition that one may, as an individual, rise above the causes, context, and conditions of one's own ratiocination, and from that enlightened and disembarassed position, subject all things to methodical, critical clarification and control.

Mitchell is quite sage to observe that such skepticism involves one in a rejection of memory, community, and forms of knowing that escape explicit formulation, focal awareness, or control—in short, a rejection of tradition. This, I think, is a precise philosophic observation to be recalled and valued most highly, at a time when it becoming almost clichéd to lament the lack of respect for intellectual or cultural authority. The invocation of these three rejections encapsulate what is unique about the new form of individualism. Said individualism impels one not simply toward expressing one's uniqueness or seeking honors and recognition within society. Rather, it leads one towards a lonely separation from the messy, sensual, and provisional stuff of merely human life in search of certitude and independence.

Indeed, memory may be a phenomenon of greater inquisition. Certainly, it plays a crucial, if somewhat murky part, in the philosophies of Michael Oakeschott, Alasdair Macintyre, and Michael Polanyi, all of whose thoughts on tradition Mitchell very ably harvests and prepares for the reader. Here, memory appears underlying the practices of Oakeschott, there mixed-into the habits and virtues of Macintyre, there again in the structures of tacit knowing delineated by Polanyi. What, though, is this elusive bird called memory? Why is our relationship to it of such seeming import to our manner of relating to the world and our fellow creatures?

As Mitchell makes clear, the radically skeptical mind of a Descartes or a Bacon seeks to unshackle itself from memory or "prejudice" (literally, "previous judgement"). It seeks to secure itself in the logic of an indubitable method, the steps, findings, and conclusions of which might, in principle, be made explicit and replayed backwards or forwards at any time without consequential deviations in the results (or at least within a reasonable margin of error). But, it is clear from a reading of the arguments of chapters 2 to 4 that this is strictly impossible, due to our embeddedness in practices, our ethos, our history, the tacit dimension of our knowing and being, etc.

The question concerning memory is not new. As Polanyi observed, it had been posed by Plato's Socrates in both the *Meno* and the *Theaetetus*, and many of Plato's dialogues are consciously constructed as dramatic recollections. We may also observe that questioning or inquiry itself is the very definition of *skepsis*. And yet, while a Nietzsche may occasionally dub Socrates a nihilist or a Popper dub Plato a totalitarian, yet never has either, to my knowledge, been prosecuted for being a Cartesian. This suggests that there may be something different about Socratic *skepsis* that may hinge on its relationship to memory.

I will suggest that the difference lies in the classical distinction made between *mneme* and *anamnesis* or memory and recollection, on the one hand, and the relationship with doubt, commitment, and practice, on the other. To be perhaps too hasty in paraphrasing a matter which has received deeper exploration in other pages, we may compare the Socratic practice of recollection to Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing and discovery, the later of which Mitchell outlines quite well. In effect, memory, practice, and experience represent the subsidiary elements which are re-collected together for inquiry and which are brought to bear as clues pointing to some entity, insight, or action beyond themselves. In other words, they make-up elements of the from in the from-to structure of consciousness.

*Skepsis* (Socrates) or critical analysis (Polanyi) thus simply designates the practice of pulling apart and examining how we act and what we think we know. However, such examination necessarily proceeds from wherever we're at, existentially speaking. The process allows for a certain amount of rectification and changing of ourselves (or turning around, in Platonic language), but it does not lend itself to raising oneself to a god-like, Archimedian point about the earth. There seems to be an intrinsic need for critical appreciation of the foundations of our knowing and being.

This point seems to be what at least MacIntyre, Polanyi, and Mitchell are getting at. To paraphrase again: we simply cannot do without a living and open-ended repertoire of experience, practices, ways of being, language, and education, etc. This is what it means to have received, to possess, or to embody a tradition. To critique oneself is to critique one's tradition. Conversely, critiquing one's tradition is critiquing oneself. While this process is integral to learning and discovery, if we do not step back down onto some ground at some point, it necessarily leads to hollowing oneself out if taken too far. A garden too weeded quickly becomes a desert. It leaves us with no nourishment, and with neither vine nor tree to climb. Thus, I strongly praise Mitchell's thought-provoking essays on the thinkers heretofore listed, the skillful conversation that he builds between them. Now though, the critique.

I fear that Mitchell mars his work somewhat by embroiling himself, not in the politics of his home country, but in the cliché language and the pre-analytical and frankly ideological topoi of contemporary American factionalism. The fact that these topoi don't rise to the level of the grandiose chicanery of a Marx or a Locke, but are as seemingly homespun and "common-sensical" as the cliché languages eviscerated by the likes of Karl Kraus and H.L. Mencken in their days, does not change their essentially obscuring and deforming character. On a strictly practical level, topoi such as "social justice warrior" add no analytical clarity to politics, nor improve the flavour or shelf-life of an otherwise excellent book.

On a scientific level, the topoi add a certain Sturm und Drang, but only short-circuit curiosity and inquiry into the phenomena of present-day American political

reality, by throwing-up a wall of easy and familiar opinions cemented with stiff emotions. On a philosophic level, one is only left, especially as a stranger and foreigner, with the perplexity as to whether, for instance, it is “society,” “justice,” or “warriorship,” which one is expected to hold in polite contempt. Naively, all three are usually considered good and laudable things.

Perhaps more to the point, I wonder to what extent Mitchell wanders into the fallacy of misplaced concreteness in his political analysis. The working definition of liberalism which Mitchell proposes seems to include 1) a disdain for tradition, 2) an obsession with freedom as a supreme and guiding principle, and 3) an metastatic vision of a cosmopolitan state with liberalism as its established orthodoxy.

It is this ideological and anti-critical framework which is assumed to animate “SJWs,” left-wing American political activism, federal policy under various administrations, and the like. One reads sentences like “Liberalism seeks X,” and finds oneself superstitiously scanning the room for the cunning Geist which so moves people against their self-knowledge and stated motivations. The Geist of liberalism is also proposed to inadvertently provoke its anti-thesis as represented in far right, alt-right, or frankly fascist counter-movements, resulting in the unexpected synthesis of the Trump administration. But frankly, here lies the fallacy. Mitchell’s working definition is merely an hypothesis and one that I frankly think would fail tests of verification or validation. Again, naively, I perceive that, in practice, the U.S.A. is currently being rocked by profound conflicts over justice, honour, security, and belonging, rather than anything as esoteric and intellectual as the freedom of autonomous individualism vs. communitarianism. If only life were so simple.

Be that as it may, I am left with three substantive questions regarding the chief investigation of Professor Mitchell’s book. First, what place does *aporia* or doubt (or *skepsis* or critical analysis) find in the “Western” tradition, however understood? Doubt about received traditions and customs seems to be an indispensable aspect of Greek philosophy and of Jewish and Christian praxis and faith, all of which are commonly understood to be chief foundations of said tradition. Second, if doubt is an essential element of Western tradition, what form should it take? Finally, what place does the study of history, in a spirit of critical appreciation, play in the matter of education and understanding of oneself and the world?



## RESPONSE

**Mark T. Mitchell**

Let me begin by thanking Colin Cordner, Will R. Jordan, and Matthew Sandwisch for doing what every author hopes his readers will do: take his arguments seriously and provide thoughtful feedback. I am grateful for their comments and for both their kind words and penetrating critiques. An author can hope for nothing more. All three interlocutors raise important questions about my argument, and while I do not have the space to deal with them all, I will try to touch on what I take to be the most penetrating.

By way of summary, for those who have not read my book, I argue that liberalism is characterized by an epistemological incoherence that manifests itself in a variety of political and social pathologies. The incoherence is this: liberalism is, so I argue, characterized by an inner urge to be liberated from limits. This desire to shake off limits has occurred on several levels. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the limits seemingly imposed by nature and by God were rejected by many of the most “advanced” thinkers. In the seventeenth century, we see a rejection every bit as sweeping and consequential: the rejection of the role of tradition in the knowing process. I argue that the epistemic role of tradition is unavoidable; thus, any attempt to reject tradition and at the same time to retain our rational faculties is to traffic in a profound incoherence. One cannot remain rational and at the same time jettison the role of tradition in achieving and maintaining rationality. Yet, so I argue, this is precisely what characterizes the essence of the liberal project. To demonstrate the systematic rejection of tradition, I explore the ideas of two of the founders of the modern world, Francis Bacon and René Descartes, both of whom make the rejection of the authority of tradition a centerpiece of their revolutionary systems. I turn then to three twentieth century thinkers who seek, in different but complementary ways, to provide an alternative to the liberal rejection of tradition. These three are Michael Oakeshott, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Polanyi.

The definition of liberalism is a real point of contention not just among the three respondents here but also in the debate over the identity and future of liberalism that is currently raging. All three respondents question, in various ways, whether my definition of liberalism is too narrow or if it over-simplifies a reality that is much more variegated and complex. This is an important point, and anyone who has spent much time in the literature realizes that liberalism is a notoriously slippery term and has been called upon to serve a variety of purposes. I’d prefer to avoid getting sidetracked by

these debates at least for a moment. As an exercise in imagination, let's provisionally suspend the use of the term "liberalism" and instead attempt to define certain salient features of the modern mind, features that Polanyi, I think, would largely agree with. Tradition represents an authoritative past that, at least to some degree, bears on the present. Tradition requires a degree of submission to an authority that one perhaps does not fully comprehend. It is, so I argue, impossible to completely rid oneself of dependence upon tradition. As Polanyi points out, even something as basic as language acquisition depends on submission to standards inherited from the past. Culture, in general, and this includes the culture of science, is transmitted via a dynamic engagement with tradition. As Will Jordan points out, Tocqueville's analysis is helpful on this point. Democratic ages are enamored, above all, by equality. When equality is the highest ideal, the problem of authority becomes acute, for authority implies hierarchy, the very opposite of equality. When thinkers such as Bacon and Descartes seek to create methods of inquiry that systematically and explicitly reject the role of tradition, we need to take notice. When Tocqueville asserts that the independence of mind that typifies Cartesian thought is also evident in the mental habits of Americans, we should pause. Americans, he writes, are disciples of Descartes even though they have never read him. This disposition, I argue, has not abated and, in fact, has only become more acute since Tocqueville visited in 1831.

Thus, what I'm trying to describe is certain contours of the modern mind, features that include, at the very center, a problematic relationship with tradition. And on this point I want to be clear. We can understand "tradition" in a variety of ways. We can think of it as discrete bits of cultural or familial inheritance (our family has goose for Christmas dinner). It can be understood as an entire network of deep and overlapping inherited structures (the Western tradition or the Christian tradition). Or it can be understood as an unavoidable feature of the knowing process, a basic and necessary condition for rationality. The focus of my book is tradition in this third sense, and it is the denial of this understanding of tradition, either implicitly or explicitly, that, so I contend, constitutes the essence of the modern mind. Of course, to deny something that must be affirmed is a recipe for incoherence, and that is precisely the condition that we find ourselves in. We have attempted to deny the role of tradition in the rational process and in so doing have failed on two levels: 1) we've created the conditions of incoherence, and 2) we have (thankfully) failed to eradicate in practice what we deny in theory, for if we were successful in jettisoning tradition as an epistemic necessity, we would summarily be rejecting rationality itself.

It is this ill-fated disposition to liberate the mind from its dependence on tradition that I identify as the essence of liberalism. If the term "liberalism" is so loaded with connotations that it distracts from the argument, then, at least at one level, I'm happy to set it aside and deal with the phenomenon, whatever we decide to call it.

With that said, one of the concerns leveled at recent critics of liberalism is that liberalism tends to be spoken of as if the concept, itself, had agency: “liberalism does this” and “liberalism causes that.” This is a persistent danger when attempting to identify an idea or set of ideas and trace their genesis and influence. Liberalism is not an independent agent. It does not act. However, the disposition to liberation that, so I argue, characterizes the essence of liberalism, does foster certain patterns of thought and behavior that, together, constitute the modern mind, and in the process, results in actions.

Jordan notes that I “enlist the aid of Tocqueville” and from that perspective he wonders if the abandonment of tradition is the result of bad philosophy (exemplified by thinkers like Bacon and Descartes) or, rather, if it is a natural consequence of democratic equality. I like this question very much. However, I would respond with another question that points out the complexity of the concepts we’re trying to nail down: is democratic equality the result of bad philosophy? If we follow Tocqueville, the answer is at least partially “yes.” But it is more. According to Tocqueville, social structures shape the minds of the citizens who inhabit them. Democratic citizens see the world differently than those whose minds have been shaped by aristocratic social forms. But, the change from aristocracy to democracy is a complex story that includes philosophical changes as well as social, economic, technological, and political innovations. We could quibble about the degree to which philosophy drives social development or vice versa, but it seems likely that the causes are complex and deeply intertwined.

Sandwich asks if the incoherencies of liberalism were there from the start or if at some point it took a wrong turn. This question, of course, turns on how we define liberalism. Clearly it would be a gross oversimplification to imagine that one day liberalism did not exist and then the next day it did. Such convenient accounts are only possible in retrospect and are always a shorthand for a complex development that happened over decades and sometimes centuries. At the same time, we must be able to identify significant changes that indicate shifts in understanding, alterations in the way people see themselves and the world they inhabit. In this respect, I would argue that when the various elements eventually converged and then congealed until an explicit rejection of the epistemic role of tradition came to characterize the essence of the system of thought, then liberalism emerged. Given that essential incoherence, liberalism is infected from the start. This is not to say that the various elements that contributed to what came to be called liberalism were, in themselves, infected. The historical development was slow and complex.

Jordan poses a series of questions that turn on the content of various traditions and the real problem of how to distinguish between good and bad traditions. As he puts it, we need to ask “whether we are ever capable of bringing with us only the purest and most helpful parts of our tradition, without including the problematic and

even contradictory bits.” This is a good question, and it relates closely to one asked by Cordner: “what place does *aporia* or doubt find in the ‘Western’ tradition?” There are no “pure” traditions. The human condition is characterized by the messiness of fallibility, uncertainty, and mixed motives. We live in the space between pure truth and absolute falsehood. We must acknowledge this fact and strive to improve what seems to be improvable, to maintain what seems good, and to excise that which appears harmful. We do so with the recognition that we could be wrong. Thus, a kind of doubt or uncertainty is present in all rational endeavors. There is, then, no blessed isle to which we can retreat or to which we can travel, where the limits and imperfections of our rationality are overcome. But the doubt of the honest inquirer is not the systematic, sweeping doubt of the bold skeptic. Doubt properly conceived is characterized by caution and humility, two traits noticeably absent from Descartes’ project of radical doubt.

With that said, some traditions are clearly better than others. This, I suppose, is a controversial claim in some quarters, smacking of a sort of chauvinism. MacIntyre, however, goes to great lengths to explain how competing traditions can be evaluated and how the “rational superiority” of a tradition can be determined. Even then, it is not a fool-proof enterprise. Errors are possible. This fallibility highlights the need for a community of inquirers, a “society of explorers” as Polanyi puts it. Together a community strives—and often gropes—toward a better and more coherent articulation of reality. This is precisely how a tradition develops. This is an important Polanyian point: a tradition is an expression of reality. It is never perfect, but a tradition, to the degree that it is healthy, reflects the real and is not a pseudo-reality imposed by the dominating will of a group or an individual.

In this regard, and addressing a question raised by Cordner, the study of history is an essential part of the enterprise. When we engage in a serious and sustained study of the past, we will come to better understand the contours and nuances of our tradition, and what is more, we likely will come to see the various strands of competing traditions that we have inherited. In this sense, it is not simple to speak of “the tradition” as if what we inherit is a monolithic and unified whole. In reality, the tradition we inherit is a complex amalgam of different traditions, some elements incompatible with other elements. We are better able to tease out the incompatibilities when we are deeply informed by a sense of the past and when we have some grasp of the trajectory that the tradition(s) we have inherited have developed over time.

Cordner argues that I drift into “cliché language” and steer into the “ideological topoi of contemporary American factionalism.” Yikes. I do, it is true, attempt to show how the consequences of liberalism tend, under some circumstances, to foster some of the most extreme illiberal rhetoric and actions on both the left and the right, but I do not limit the argument to the American context. Some of the same dynamics are at work in Europe. In a related comment, Sandwisch regrets that I do not address

some of our contemporary challenges using Polanyi's framework of moral inversion. Indeed, this is something that could have been more fully developed. My forthcoming book will attempt to work through some of the contours of contemporary issues in a way that, while not explicitly expressed in Polanyian terms, clearly complements his analysis.

What is clearly evidenced in this give and take exercise is something that Corder points out and that Jordan and Sandwisch implicitly demonstrate: participating in a living, vibrant tradition requires that the participants engage in an ongoing, open-ended quest for the truth. In this regard, disagreement requires an underlying agreement that makes communication and progress in understanding possible. Epistemic humility is necessary. The encouragements of my three interlocutors confirms my belief that an initial intimation, when pursued more fully, would yield fruit. Their criticisms have led me to think more clearly about some matters, have led me to see new avenues that might be pursued, and have even led me to see how I could have more effectively developed certain arguments. For the twin gifts of praise and criticism, I am grateful.



# ON THE CLANDESTINE MORAL ORDER EMBODIED IN PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLANATIONS OF ACTIONS



**Jean-Baptiste Lamarche**

**Keywords:** Charles Taylor, individualism, Michael Polanyi, moral inversion (theory of), psychoanalysis, repression (theory of), Sigmund Freud, vocabularies of motive

## ABSTRACT

*In many contemporary societies, multitudes have used and are still using psychoanalysis to account for their actions to one another, by attributing to them repressed motives as their causes. The significance of this wide metaclinical use of psychoanalysis remains deeply misunderstood, as searchers predominantly treat psychoanalysis as a pure theory (despite the fact that it transformed social interactions), or as an asocial procedure, achieved by individuals escaping the moral requirements of society. To correct our vision of psychoanalysis, I rely on Michael Polanyi's analysis of moral inversion and Charles W. Mills' sketch of a psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives. An analysis of Freud's theory of repression benefitting from those complementary insights shows that it allows contemporaries to assert backhandedly and indirectly their commitment to the cardinal values of an emerging individualist society.*

In many contemporary societies, “everyday life, as expressed in the common speech, has been invaded by the terminology and interpretative schemes of psychoanalysis,” which “have become matter-of-course expressions in broad strata of the population” (Berger 1965, 27-28). Far from belonging exclusively to isolated thinkers or specialists, this theory reached multitudes, who use it to explain myriads of actions by attributing to them repressed motives as their causes. Psychoanalysis is not only widely accepted on

a theoretical level; it is applied to flesh and blood human beings. It does not only offer “a way of understanding the nature of man” but also “an ordering of human experience on the base of this understanding” (Berger 1965, 27).

As this “interpretative system...mediates between members of the group” (Moscovici 2008, 113), we are far from facing a strictly psychological phenomenon, the cluster of separate uses of psychoanalysis by individuals who would each use it without taking other users into account. In fact, we are in the presence of “a social phenomenon of truly astounding scope” (Berger 1965, 26).

And yet, a properly sociological explanation of it largely remains non-existent. In fact, psychoanalysis is mostly considered as if it only belonged to the world of ideas. Even though this phenomenon shows clearly that psychoanalysis is not just “a mode of information,” but also “a tool that can influence people” and “a weapon, a way of controlling and influencing others,” “we talk only about its impact on literature, art, philosophy or the human sciences” (Moscovici 2008, 50, 119 and xxiv); its users are inclined to think it is “pointless, or even pernicious, to take into account their own determinisms and the effects they produce” (Moscovici 2008, xxii). Inspired by John Dewey, who remarks that according to “intellectualism,” theory is born out of an observation by “a spectator beholding the world from without” (1929, 290), I will call this approach of psychoanalysis the intellectualist one. Clearly, the historical study of psychoanalysis cries out for a novel way to conceive psychoanalysis in its historical and social context. A correction of our vision is required to give us the heuristic capacity to get a grip on the historical phenomenon in front of our very eyes.

The most influential intellectualist approach of psychoanalysis is the one articulated by Freud. Psychoanalysis would be an inherently asocial activity, born from the private self-observation of the individual who eliminates “the criticism by which he normally sifts the thoughts that occur to him” (SE IV, 101).<sup>1</sup> The individual would discover in himself hitherto repressed desires (sexual ones) by escaping the pressures of moral requirements of others—i.e., in the margins of the social world. The psychoanalytic witness would develop a purely observational attitude to himself, by observing his internal process “without any reference to other people” (SE V, 672), remaining “completely objective,” observing what comes to mind “whether it [is] inappropriate or not” (SE II, 154).

According to this asocial hypothesis, psychoanalysis, being located beyond moral requirements, would be essentially asocial. Freud is certainly right to think that a social order requires moral requirements. A society “can neither create nor recreate itself without creating some kind of ideal by the same stroke,” for “the hold society has over consciousness owes far less to the prerogative its physical superiority gives it than to the moral authority with which it is invested” (Durkheim 1995, 425 and 209). But, as I will show in this article, psychoanalysis does imply some sort of ideals. The picture of

psychoanalysis Freud offers, as an amoral phenomenon, deeply distorts psychoanalysis' complex dialectic with moral aspirations.

And yet, this picture of amoral psychoanalysis is extremely influential. Many promising contributions endorse it. Peter L. Berger writes that "psychoanalysis gives its adherents the luxury of a convincing picture of themselves without making any moral demand on them" (1963, 62). Charles Wright Mills' suggestive sketch of a psychoanalytic "vocabulary of motives" falls into the same trap: he suggests that the diffusion of this vocabulary is driven by hedonism. This vocabulary would belong to "an upper bourgeois patriarchal group with strong sexual and individualistic orientation" (1940, 912). Needless to say, once one accepts this amoral picture, it is extremely difficult to see how the psychoanalytic idiom could be a truly social phenomenon.

More convincingly, Serge Moscovici suggests that "hidden and involuntary" values and ideals are "embodied" in psychoanalytic accounts of action (2008, 21, 60, 74-75, 149 and 181), but he does not tell us how and why these values and ideals are hidden or involuntary. To get a good grip on the social order which is invoked by this recourse to a psychoanalytic idiom, we must identify the values and ideals on which it relies and the modality of their expression.

In this article, I will argue that Michael Polanyi's analysis of "moral inversion" provides us with the theoretical tools to answer those questions. Our modern societies are inclined to turn their back on ingenuous moral advice and lofty moral ideals. Whereas our predecessors were inclined, when they faced misfortunes, to look for the guidance of priests or ministers, or to identify sinners, we most often consult specialists whose scientific authority appears to be based on the sole examination of facts, and who merely talk about "health" and "illness". Polanyi argues that actually we are also committed to various moral passions, but that we are inclined to assert these passions in indirect ways, most notably by veiling them in "scientific" rhetoric. This hypothesis offers fresh illumination on our problem.

As we will see, Polanyi's hypothesis marks a break with the intellectualist approach of analysis. It implies that the psychoanalytic code offers "a directed change within the world" and that its user is an "active participant" of it (Dewey 1929, 290). Polanyi invites us to pay attention to the actions that Freud and his heirs accomplished by using psychoanalytic theories.

In this article, designed to outline a path for future historical and sociological researches, I will develop a new picture of psychoanalysis, which will help us get a grip on the social phenomenon at hand. I will first present Freud's asocial account of psychoanalysis, by paying particular attention to Freud's declared criticism of morality. Then, relying mostly on Polanyi's and Mills' indications, I will develop a critique of Freud's narrative which will lead to a more realist narrative. We will see that Freud, by creating a psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives, instituted a new way to account for

human action, which orders different social interactions by gauging them against moral principles affirmed backhandedly.

## Freud's Declared Theoretical Critique of Moral Motivation

First, let's have a closer look at Freud's declared critique of moral motivation. (In this section, I will mostly present Freud's thought in his own terms.)

### *The Conflicting Motives of the Patient*

Freud notes that the patients of the psychoanalytic cure have lost at least partially the ability to account for their actions by ascribing motives to them. If "we examine with a critical eye the account that the patient has given us," we shall "quite infallibly discover gaps and imperfections in it" (SE II, 293). The psychoanalyst questions "the force ascribed by the patient to his motives" (SE II, 293): when the patient "is asked why he is acting in this way," the reasons he offers are frequently "unconvincing" and "inadequate;" he "feels compelled to invent some obviously unsatisfactory reason" (SE IV, 147-148).

The invented motivation which the patient attributes to his action is only a "rationalization," a "screen motive" (Ernest Jones and Karl Abraham coined these expressions).

The desire that really drives its carrier is not only unavowed: it is also unavowable. The avowal of this desire is "embarrassing or distressing" (SE VII, 251) because it is "repulsive from the ethical, aesthetic and social point of view" (SE XV, 142). On the other hand, the screen motive, conforming to ethical, aesthetic and social requirements, is abundantly confessed, as it allows the justification of action and thus offers manifest benefits.

It is precisely because a desire is unconfessable that it is "repressed". A "wishful impulse" proved "incompatible with the ethical and aesthetic standards" so it "fell a victim to repression, was pushed out of consciousness with all its attached memories, and was forgotten" (SE XI, 24).

The theory of repression is "the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests" (SE XIV, 16), as the repressed "is the prototype of the unconscious for us" (SE XIX, 15). It supposes that someone may repel an undesirable desire out of her "preconscious" into her "unconscious" (SE XVI, 294-296); a "resistance" then prevents the repressed desire from returning to consciousness (SE VII, 251). This process only seems to be successful, for "*the repressed wishful impulse continues to exist in the unconscious. It is on the look-out for an opportunity of being activated*" (SE XI, 27, emphasis original). The repressed desire often succeeds in expressing itself. Various phenomena (dreams, slips of the tongue, illnesses, etc.) are "symptoms" expressing this repressed desire: each of them is an "unrecognizably distorted substitute" (SE XX, 203)

of this desire. Thus, repression prevents a desire “from finding direct expression and diverts it along indirect paths” (SE XIII, 167).

In this way, various phenomena “could be traced to interference by unknown and unavowed motives” (SE VI, 154). By decoding these symptoms, the psychoanalytic cure could identify the unconfessed desires of the patient.

Psychoanalytic therapy is successful when the patient is able to acknowledge the hitherto refused drive as his own (for example by a process of “abreaction that is, an emotional release by which a subject frees himself from the affect attached to the memory of a traumatic event). The hitherto repressed drive can then once again be “being leveled out along the normal path leading to consciousness and movement” (SE XVIII, 236).

### *An Anthropology*

Repression shows that the individual’s psyche is the battleground of “a conflict of motives” (SE VII, 110). The symptoms can be “traced to interference by unknown and unavowed motives—or, as one may say, to a *counter-will*” (SE VI, 154, emphasis original), opposed to the conscious will that the individual recognizes as her own by her declarations.

The “patient’s symptom and pathological manifestations” are

...at bottom motives, instinctual impulses. But the patient knows nothing of these elementary motives or not enough. We teach him to understand the way in which these highly complicated mental formations are compounded; we trace the symptoms back to the instinctual impulses which motive them; we point out to the patient these instinctual motives, which are present in his symptoms and of which he has hitherto been unaware (SE XVII, 159-160).

The human motive has a double aspect, as it is both the driving force behind the action and the reason for it. With his theory of the counter-will, Freud endeavored to split the two dimensions, separating the claimed and professed desires (completely cultural reasons) from the disowned animal drives and appetites which are “the true motive force” behind action (SE XV, 224): time and again, he depicts a sharp opposition between the “wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego” and the “instinct that has been tamed” (SE XXI, 79), which belongs to an “individual will which is identical with the bidding of society” (SE XVI, 311); between “the deeper and the manifest motives” (SE XXI, 23); between the confessed motive, which is at most “a rationalization” of action, and the sexual, unconfessed motivation, which is its “true underlying determination” (SE XVII, 23); between the “secondary motives” which the patient puts forward to account for his actions and “their true significance” (SE X, 192).

In fact, allegedly moral motivations would also be animal and amoral drives, but “sublimated” ones. That is, they would be drives that “are diverted from their sexual aims and directed to others that are socially higher and no longer sexual” (SE XVI, 23). Thus, culture itself “obeys an internal erotic impulsion” (SE XXI, 133).

### *From the Unconfessable Desire to the Unacceptable Psychoanalysis*

The repression of the unacceptable desire would be a necessary condition of the socio-cultural order: “civilization has been created under the pressure of the exigencies of life at the cost of satisfaction of the instincts” (SE XVI, 22-23). For this reason, the social order would just as necessarily be opposed to the psychoanalytic unveiling of the repressed desire. Society “is *bound to offer us resistance*, for we adopt a critical attitude towards it,” it “*cannot respond with sympathy* to a relentless exposure of its injurious effects and deficiencies” (SE XI, 147, emphasis added). So, this psychoanalytic unveiling could only happen in the margins of the social world.

### *Theory of Repression as a Critical Reinterpretation of Moral Motivation*

The theory of repression transforms the way we look at overtly moral motives. Freud claims that the repression of the unavowable desire causes varied “injurious effects and deficiencies”. Theory of repression is thus a critical theory. It leads to an equally critical reinterpretation of the moral motivation which appears to create this inner censorship. When she is observed through psychoanalytic glasses, the person who claims to act for moral reasons rather seems to hide to herself her inner truth, and to be driven by a fear of the interiorized judgment of others and even by the cruelty that she directs against herself. Indeed, in order to inhibit the inner drive of the individual, the culture would use his aggressiveness against himself. His “harsh aggressiveness” is “directed towards his own ego”; it “expresses itself as a need for punishment” (SE XXI, 123).

## **Moral Inversion: An Overview**

Let us now turn to Polanyi’s reflections on moral inversion. One could argue that the critical analysis of this complex phenomenon is at the crossroads of the anthropological, historical, sociological, political, ethical and epistemological reflections of Polanyi:

1. it implies a certain image of the human being and modernity;
2. it involves an explanation of the solidity of the credit given to various “conceptual frameworks” (I will come back to this in my conclusion);
3. it is linked to a reassessment of both political expectations and the “objectivist” epistemology.

Within the limited framework of this text, I will mostly confine myself to the elements necessary for developing an alternative to Freud's account (item #1 in my list).

Polanyi thinks moral inversion appears in a social world that has a deeply ambivalent relationship to moral judgments, due to the conjunction of powerful "moral passions" with "objectivism" (Yeager 2002-2003, offers a clear overview). Moral passions produce a desire to fulfill different moral aspirations: "limitless moral demands...have suddenly spread all over the globe" (Polanyi 1974, 229). Objectivism, this "desperate refusal of all knowledge that is not absolutely impersonal" implies "a mechanical conception of man" (Polanyi 1974, 214), as driven by "Power, Economic Interest, Subconscious Desire" (Polanyi 1998, 6); it creates "a picture of human affairs construed in terms of appetites, checked only by fear" (Polanyi 1998, 34). The conjunction of moral passions and objectivism, as it simultaneously induces modern people to affirm and deny such passions, puts them into an impossible situation. "A generation grew up full of moral fire and yet despising reason and justice" (Polanyi 1998, 6).

In the chapter of the *Sources of the Self* on the reductionist anthropology of the Enlightenment, Taylor offers a strikingly similar analysis.<sup>2</sup> Reductionist philosophers meet a contradiction, as their utilitarian anthropology discredits the moral aspirations that drive their own thinking. "Theories of Enlightenment materialist reductionism...have two sides—a reductive ontology and a moral impetus—which are hard to combine" (Taylor 1989, 337).

Various conceptual frameworks (notably Marxism and psychoanalysis) appear to resolve this contradiction: Polanyi claims that moral passions can be asserted without creating discomfort, once they are dressed up, thanks to these frameworks, "in purely scientific terms" (1974, 230). Taylor points out that modern people can also assert their moral aspirations indirectly by invoking them in "polemical passages" directed against various moral lackings. "What they are attacked for lacking, or for suppressing, or for destroying expresses what we who attack them are moved by and cherish." (Taylor 1989, 339)

Hence, "the traditional forms for holding moral ideals had been shattered and their moral passions diverted into the only channels which a strictly mechanistic conception of man and society left open to them" (Polanyi 1998, 131). Polanyi (1998, 126; 1974, 233) distinguishes between "spurious" and "actual" forms of moral inversion: in its milder stage, moral inversion merely leads people to give amoral names to their moral actions; in the more extreme stage, moral inversion also induces people to act amorally.

## **Moral Vocabularies of Motives According to the Masters of Suspicion**

As Polanyi's analysis of moral inversion implies a certain picture of human motivations, it possesses an anthropological dimension. "To recognize the existence of moral inversion is to acknowledge moral forces as primary motives of man; it is to deny that

‘sublimation’ underlies (as Freud thought) the creation of culture” (Polanyi 1974, 234). This Polanyian anthropology stands in opposition to reductionist anthropologies, most notably those developed by the authors known as the masters of suspicion: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Freud. Those deniers of moral motivation pursue the critical work developed previously by other authors, such as François de La Rochefoucauld or Jeremy Bentham.

From time immemorial, people have attributed amoral appetites or moral reasons to actions. In doing so, they distinguish the worth of different actions. The masters of suspicion impel us to stop to giving credence to this distinction, by refusing the reality of one of the points of comparison: ostensibly moral actions would also be driven by amoral forces (e.g., by sublimated drives). These authors create a hermeneutics of suspicion, insofar as they offer a method of interpretation of the moral motivation—an exegesis of the apparent meaning by a latent meaning. Polanyi notes that such a hermeneutics reveals “an active principle immanent in a manifest event”, as “material interests...are regarded as immanent in moral aspirations” (1974, 229). The non-moral motivation is considered as immanent to declared moral claims.

This animal reality would not be recognized because the vocabulary we use to describe our motivations penalizes amoral aims and thus make advantageous the avowal of moral motives. The authors of amoral actions would try to veil them behind the moral principles they profess to follow. Hence, the hermeneutics of suspicion claims that the language of action is nobler than the action. To overcome this obstacle, and grasp the true motive of the action, the masters of suspicion endeavored, like Bentham (2007, 104), “to lay aside the old phraseology [of motivations] and invent a new one.”

### **Turning Freud’s Account of Psychoanalysis Against Itself**

According to the masters of suspicion, people hide their animal appetites under moral motivations. Conversely, Polanyi claims that in the contemporary world, it is the moral aspirations of the modern people that are “silenced and repressed” (1998, 130), hidden under the animal appetites that modern people are inclined to invoke to explain various actions and gestures. “The power of Marxism over the mind is based here on a process exactly inverse of Freudian sublimation” (1998, 131).

The critical analysis of moral inversion leads to a critique of its two sources, as Polanyi invites us to question our “extravagant moral demands” (1998, 5) and to abandon the “objectivist” conception of humanity and the universe, most notably by recognizing openly our moral aspirations: “by a kind of inverted Freudian ab-reaction this captive zeal for righteousness may yet be gradually released from its pathological repressions and enter once more into the context of consciously declared moral aspirations” (1974, 243).

The specifically Freudian vocabulary that Polanyi uses here to describe the attempt to free oneself from moral inversion (“repression,” “sublimation,” “ab-reaction”) clearly indicates that his critique of the masters of suspicion redouble the critical gesture performed by their hermeneutics. As we saw, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud thought we struggle to name and recognize our true motivations because our habitual ways to describe our actions distort those motivations. The Freudian vocabulary to which Polanyi resorts implies that the suspicious way to account for human actions caricatures one of our deepest aspirations and leaves us unable to acknowledge it: in the current historical situation, the moral aspiration can “no more confess itself for what it is” (Polanyi 1998, 58); “embarrassed by the traditional language of morals” (Yeager 2002-2003, 29), we can no longer claim with conviction our moral impulses, so we are unable to fully articulate to ourselves our actions. Hence, Polanyi turns upside down the Freudian concepts, which he uses against the phraseologies of motivations invented by the masters of suspicion.

Polanyi’s historical hypothesis implies an anti-intellectualist approach of the hermeneutics of suspicion. It implies that this hermeneutics, far from being a pure theory having no effect on the social world it interprets (as one might think reading so many philosophical commentators on the masters of suspicion), transformed this world by interpreting it; that far from being confined into the specialized field of history of ideas, this reinterpretation of the motivations of human action permeated “popular thought” (Polanyi 1974, 234), changing the way we account for our actions to one another;<sup>3</sup> that this transformation made acceptable motives which thus far had been considered unacceptable and unacceptable motives which hitherto had been considered acceptable. This hypothesis can thus help us understand how the supposedly unacceptable repressed desire could become popular.

Furthermore, whereas Freud depicts the contrast of acceptable and unacceptable motives as a contrast essentially identical across societies, Polanyi’s hypothesis implies a historicization of this contrast, and a comparative look at the various ways societies articulate it.

## A Psychoanalytic Vocabulary of Motives

### *Freud, Questioner of Acts*

Mills notes that different societies distinguish differently between satisfactory or adequate motives and unsatisfactory or inadequate ones.

A satisfactory or adequate motive is one that satisfies the questioners of an act or program whether it be the other’s or the actor’s. As a word, a *motive tends to be one which is to the actor and to the other members of a situation an unquestioned answer to questions concerning*

*social and lingual conduct...* The words which in a type situation will fulfil this function are circumscribed by the vocabulary of motives acceptable for such situations. Motives are accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs or acts (Mills 1940, 907, emphasis original).

At first sight, Freud appears to offer a theory of motives quite similar to Mill's, which we could locate on the same level—an academic one. But to avoid placing psychoanalysis on an intellectualist Procrustean bed, we must keep firmly in mind that it practically helped him to negotiate interactions, in ways that led to the unequivocal transformation of the rhetorical context of these negotiations.

Especially in the psychoanalytic setting, Freud repeatedly asked for the motives for different actions. “I asked the patient ‘Why do you do that? What sense has it?’” (SE XV, 261). When he met patients acting “without giving any reason” (SE VII, 28), Freud was inclined to notice it and ask for one. And with the help of psychoanalysis, it was possible to ask for the reasons of “a whole number of actions which were held to be unmotivated” (SE IX, 104): dreams, illnesses, slips of the tongue, etcetera. “Well, what do you do if I make an unintelligible utterance to you? You question me, is that not so? Why should we not do the same thing to the dreamer—*question him as to what his dreams mean?*” (SE XV, 100, emphasis original). Furthermore, as we saw, he claimed that the motive that the patient ascribed to her action to explain it was frequently unsatisfactory—it was not a “sufficient motivation” (SE II, 293). All this amounts to saying that Freud was himself one of the *questioners of an act* which, as Mills notes, are of critical importance in the creation and transformation of vocabularies of motives.

### *A Harmless Desire*

As we saw, Freud declared that the animal motives unveiled by psychoanalysis were deemed “of a reprehensible nature, repulsive from the ethical, aesthetic and social point of view” and thus could not be confessed. For that reason, psychoanalysis could not be socially accepted either.

Now we can observe a contradiction between this Freudian theory of the acceptable and unacceptable motives and the way in which Freud, in practice, reacted to the motives uttered by his patients: for he clearly treated the supposedly acceptable motivation (the rationalization or screen motive) as an “unconvincing”, “inadequate” or “unsatisfactory” motivation and the supposedly unacceptable motivation (the repressed drive) as a satisfactory one. How can we make sense of this contradiction?

We must note, first, that when Freud describes animal motives as ethically repulsive ones, he is being ironic, since they are only repulsive from the point of view of the inner censorship. In reality, as he points out, the wishes “which are censored and given a distorted expression in dreams, are first and foremost manifestations of an unbridled

and ruthless egoism” (SE XV, 142); psychoanalysis shows that the repressed is simply “the initial, primitive, infantile part of mental life.” “We are not so evil as we were inclined to suppose from the interpretation of dreams” (SE XV, 210-211).

In fact, Freud showed that the motives that he claimed were unacceptable should actually be accepted, notably with his own confessions of repressed motives. For Freud staged his confessions in such a way that these motives appear harmless: he stressed that the confession of a desire does not lead to its fulfillment. “If our evil intentions begin to stir, they can, after all, do nothing more than cause a dream, which is harmless from the practical point of view” (SE XV, 218). It is “best” to “acquit dreams” (SE V, 620). In other words, the confessed undesirable desires can be sublimated. Here, Freud showed that his amoral vocabulary of motive could be accepted without actually modifying conduct (in Polanyi’s parlance: the moral inversion he prompted us to undertake was largely *spurious*). In thus redescribing amoral motives, Freud made them more acceptable.

### *Teaching a New Vocabulary of Motives*

Freud instituted a new way to account for human action, which he deliberately taught. The education provided to the patient should “induce him to adopt our conviction” (SE XVII, 159) and “to adopt the analytic attitude” (SE XII, 167). In this way, Freud, and so many psychoanalysts after him, taught his patients a new phraseology of motivations. “When introspecting on the couches of Freud, patients used the only vocabulary of motives they knew; Freud got his hunch and guided further talk” (Mills 1940, 912). That was the impetus for the diffusion of a psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives.

And Freud’s reader, just like his patient, was able to handle psychoanalytic theories easily, “like possessions of his own” (SE XIV, 49). So, when one of those readers, “being familiar with the psycho-analytical method,” wondered whether one of his gestures, at first glance unmotivated, was actually driven by a repressed motive, “he decided to investigate the matter” (SE V, 195).

### *Beyond the Padded Walls of Therapists*

This psychoanalytic vocabulary of motive quickly spread beyond the padded walls of therapists. After a few decades, this psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives was widely diffused in many countries. It gained currency: in many contemporary societies, it became “permissible, or even advisable” to offer psychoanalytic explanations of actions (Moscovici 2008, xxviii); as it were, psychoanalysis became “a partially automatic system of interpretation” (Moscovici 2008, 192).

To those “who have become accustomed to the psychoanalytic terminology of motives, all others seem self-deceptive” (Mills 1940, 912), especially the old *lofty*

vocabulary of motives, which Freud has attacked so ferociously. Freud's followers also developed the habit of looking and asking for motives. Mills (1940, 911) refers to the psychoanalytic "systematic motive-mongering." They questioned the operating power of many professed motives; they attributed repressed drives to the actions of various persons; they invited them to acknowledge as their own these drives (on the complex and methodic orchestration of these avowals, see Lamarche Forthcoming 1); they described the unwillingness to confess alleged repressed desires as resistances, born from repression.

In this way, they willingly explained human actions by animal motives. "Part of the legacy of Freud is that we have all become adept at seeking out the sexual ingredient in many forms of nonsexual behaviour and symbolism" (Gagnon and Simon 1973, 17).

### *The Backhanded Affirmation of Moral Passions in Psychoanalytic Explanations*

To fully explain how this psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives could distinguish satisfactory and unsatisfactory motives, and thus guide and order social interactions, it is necessary to identify the hidden values and norms it embodies. As previously noted, the theory of repression offers a *critical* reinterpretation of moral motivations. Psychoanalysis is "a psychology which discredits as mere secondary rationalization" these moral purposes (Polanyi 1998, 37). But with the help of Polanyi and Taylor, one can realize that this critical attack is only one side of the complex dialectic of this theory to moral aspirations. Borrowing the words that Polanyi applies to Marxism, one could say that "the mechanism" of Freud's theory is "working in two opposite and yet mutually correlated directions." In the case of psychoanalysis, just as in the case of Marxism, the declared attempt to reveal the non-moral motivation immanent to declared moral claims is only "the first kind of immanence, the *negative* branch" (Polanyi 1974, 229, emphasis original) of the theory.

To achieve a complete picture, one must also take account of "the second kind of immanence" the "*positive* branch" (Polanyi 1974, 230, emphasis original) of the theory: undeclared moral aspirations are immanent in apparently non-moral motivations. Indeed, the theory of repression, in spite of the fact that it implies a devastating critique of moral aspirations, offers to those who use it to explain actions and gestures the opportunity to assert their commitment to different values by following precisely the two indirect ways we previously distinguished.

The affirmation of values that the theory of repression allows proceeds, first of all, through the critical description of the moral lackings of the authors of repression, since the act of repression is portrayed as a failure to meet different moral requirements. When Freud attributes different injurious effects and deficiencies to repression, which is itself attributed to the harmful action of a tamed will, created by the constraint of parental education, he indicates the importance of acting in an autonomous way. And

when he describes repression as an inner deceit (an “ostrich policy” (SE V, 600), an “inner dishonesty” (SE XIV, 20), etc.), he indicates the importance of acting in an authentic way. These background moral judgments appear in the very words used to explain the nature of repression. For these words tacitly compare the act of repression with a free, entirely voluntary action, decided in full knowledge of the facts by a person who looks forward and stoically faces one’s own truth, no matter how dark it is. To ascribe a repressed intention to someone’s action is to assign to that person an action that deviates from this ideal action. This amounts to saying that the attribution of a repressed desire to an action indirectly asserts moral expectations (disappointed ones) and that the psychoanalytic interpretation of culture encloses “a disguised imperative” (Polanyi 1974, 180). Furthermore, this attribution, quite often, generates a critical reaction (it develops in two directions: not only as a therapeutic attempt to unveil and lift existing repressions but also as a prophylactic attempt to prevent future ones).

Secondly, the psychoanalytic assertion of values operates through their naturalisation. For the misfortunes generated by the non-observance of the moral requirements we just identified, far from being portrayed as the consequence of the punitive sanctions of the group, is rather attributed to a natural phenomenon (the return of the repressed through the symptom). Psychoanalysis appears to show that the repressed material “has become pathogenic for the very reason of its effort to lie concealed” (SE VII, 24): the values asserted (autonomy and authenticity) are thus enshrined in the cosmos, which appears to be morally sensitive. In this way, the explanations of human affairs which rely on the theory of repression can be presented as pure judgments of facts. So, the psychoanalytic vocabulary of motive *does* allow the affirmation of different moral aspirations. It “impregnates material ends with the fervour of moral passions” (Polanyi 1974, 230).

Turning Freud’s very words against his account of psychoanalysis, one could say that a contemporary censorship prevents moral aspiration “from finding direct expression and diverts it along indirect paths”, in what appear to be purely objective explanations of natural drives. The moral motivations underlying the theory of repression are “safe against unmasking, since they remain undeclared”; they “arouse powerful moral passions in others—without ever pronouncing any moral judgment” (Polanyi 1974, 230).

This critical analysis suggests that the hermeneutics of suspicion is a not only a cause of the contradiction to which Polanyi and Taylor draw attention (by offering a reductive anthropology which induces us to deny the existence of moral passions), it is also a tool which seems to resolve this contradiction, as it provides a way of affirming these moral passions in a clandestine way. Insofar as that this need to affirm moral passions is a collective need, Polanyi’s account is in a position to clarify the broad meta-clinical echo generated by analytical theories.

## A Self-Defeating Prophecy

As we saw, this indirect affirmation of values explains that the supposedly unconfessable desire is not only treated as morally acceptable (because it is not harmful): the confession of this desire even seems admirable, as it embodies different virtue; this confession is warmly welcomed because it is treated as a sign of authenticity, of bravery. Following his public confession of a repressed desire, Freud defied the reader: would he dare “being franker than I am” (SE IV, 121)? He was a paragon of authenticity.

Since the author of such a confession appeared to be morally exemplary, Freud was able to complete the reversal of the old constellation of motives. Not only was he treating the lofty moral motives, which until then were deemed satisfactory, as unsatisfactory ones; he was also treating motives which were deemed unsatisfactory as satisfactory ones.

We can glimpse here that Freud used his theory of the acceptable and unacceptable desires to challenge his readers. Would they be honest enough to escape the grip of the social control and stoically face the reality of their animal drive? According to Freud’s narrative, the individual who has repressed his own unacknowledged desire would also be incapable of recognizing the repressed drive of others—as witnessing their drives also arouses his own resistance (Lamarche Forthcoming, 1). So, his readers could signal their willingness to face their own inner depths by favorably accepting Freud’s confessions of supposedly unacceptable desires. This amounts to saying that the theory of the unacceptable avowal (which is the starting point for the asocial theory of psychoanalysis) was used as a self-defeating prophecy: it was uttered in order to be defeated.

## Conclusion

With the help of Polanyi’s and Taylor’s minute deciphering of the indirect modes of expression of values prevalent among modern societies, we were able to understand how the psychoanalytic idiom offers to contemporaries the opportunity to assert their commitment to individualist values (authenticity and autonomy) simply by explaining themselves to each other.<sup>4</sup> So contrary to what Berger, Mills and so many others think, the adoption of the psychoanalytic idiom does not entail an abandonment of moral standards. The use of a psychoanalytic vocabulary of motives enables the affirmation of an inspiring ideal of individual dignity and integrity. We can glimpse here that the psychoanalytic vocabulary of motive offers to contemporaries the occasion to reaffirm in common their commitment to the standards of an emerging modernist society. Undoubtedly, this hypothesis captures several features of the social phenomenon at hand, which the dominant intellectualist paradigm utterly fails to explain: the wide attachment to psychoanalytic theory (“supposedly scientific assertions are...accepted

only because they satisfy certain moral passions” [Polanyi 1974, 230]), the motivation to use it, and the fact that it could be used to question and control others.

Polanyi’s critical reflections on psychoanalysis do not stop there. In a dense passage, he adds that the theoretical systems allowing the clandestine expression of moral values

is also potent in its own defence. Any criticism of its scientific part is rebutted by the moral passions behind it, while any moral objections to it are coldly brushed aside by invoking the inexorable verdict of its scientific findings. Each of the two components...takes it in turn to draw attention away from the other when it is under attack (Polanyi 1974, 230).

Hence, the fact that psychoanalysis makes it possible to express values indirectly could also explain the limited influence of the criticisms directed against its weaknesses. This hypothesis implies a distinction of the contexts: these values could be evoked more strongly at certain times, to dodge theoretical criticisms, while being muted at other times, when psychoanalysis is faced with moral objections. Psychoanalysis could resist moral and theoretical objections which together would invalidate it since psychoanalysis is “a largely conjectural and rather vague doctrine” (Polanyi 1974, 139), if these objections are “met one by one,” that is, “each doubt is defeated in its turn” (Polanyi 1974, 289).

So the rich constellation of Polanyi’s reflections on “moral inversion” includes not only an examination of the complex relationship between modern society and moral passions, broad enough to capture the breadth of the extra-clinical interest elicited by psychoanalysis in the contemporary world, but also an extremely specific historical hypothesis aiming at explaining the solidity of the credit granted to theories driven by moral inversion, against theoretical critiques “which in our view should invalidate it”; moral inversion could at least partially explain the “resistance of an idiom of belief against the impact of adverse evidence” (1974, 288). Turning Freud against himself once again, Polanyi writes that moral inversion thus provides Marxism and psychoanalysis a “defence mechanism” (1974, 291).

But here we are reaching beyond the reflections of Polanyi addressed in this article (his conception of modernity and of human beings). Here we are reaching his sociological analysis of the stability of conceptual frameworks—a reflection openly inspired by Edward E. Evans-Pritchard’s minute description of the permutation in the uses of an idiom, from one context to another (Polanyi 1974, 288-292). A full exposition of Polanyi’s complex analysis of moral inversion, which could throw further light on the puzzling historical destiny of psychoanalytic theory,<sup>5</sup> will integrate this second hypothesis.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The abbreviation “SE” is followed by the volume and page of the *Standard Edition* of Freud’s works (Freud 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Taylor, who states reservations about Polanyi’s hypothesis of modernity’s limitless moral passions (2017, 39-40), effectively demonstrates, by developing an account of moral inversion which does without this causal hypothesis, that it is not necessary to explain this phenomenon.

<sup>3</sup>Compared to Nietzsche’s, or even Marx’s, Freud’s hermeneutics has played a significant role in this transformation: psychoanalytic theories have been mostly used in daily life, to account not only for the actions of distant “historic” or public figures but also for one’s own actions and those of close ones.

<sup>4</sup>This avenue of expression does not make these values any less powerful. “Our most deeply ingrained convictions are determined by the idiom in which we interpret our experience” (Polanyi 1974, 287).

<sup>5</sup>Elsewhere, I have shown that this hypothesis successfully accounts for the very effective protection of the Freudian drive theory against various theoretical objections (Lamarche Forthcoming 2).

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# FROM “MEANING” TO REALITY: TOWARD A POLANIAN COGNITIVE THEORY OF LITERATURE



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**Keywords:** Literature, literary cognitivism, reading, meaning, reality, conditions of sense, education, social constructivism, postcritical, modernity, Cormac McCarthy

## ABSTRACT

*This essay articulates a theory and practice of “reading toward reality” based on Polanyi’s conception of scientific discovery as proceeding from the apprehension of problems, guided by our tacit intimations of a new coherence that would resolve these problems, and a reality as the condition of such inquiry. I argue that, analogously, (good) literature poses problems of sense that refer us to our own tacit knowledge of the normative conditions of sense—conditions which underlie and sometimes contradict our conventional modes of sensemaking. Literature thus can educate us to those human realities which underlie our everyday social world and to the conditions by which we might more adequately judge and make sense of our experience.*

In the February 2019 issue of *TAD*, Jean Bocharova, Stanley Scott, Martin E. Turkis II, and Jon Fennell articulated aspects of a Polanian theory (or theories) of literature, elaborating on Polanyi’s own remarks on literature (primarily in *Meaning*) to show how literary works engage our tacit knowledge to move us toward an apprehension of more comprehensive and deeper truths.

I am generally in sympathy with the arguments presented in these papers, but I believe that the most comprehensive, rigorous and valuable application of Polanyi’s

ideas to the study of literature depends on the following additional components, which I will develop in this essay:

1. Literature occasions not only *meaning* but *knowledge*—knowledge of human *realities* and the conditions of making sense of human experience and human life.
2. An adequate characterization of the kind of reality to which literature educates us requires:
  - a. A theory of social construction, which explains why our ordinary everyday way of apprehending the world is inadequate.
  - b. A theory of modernity, which explains why we especially need art now to direct us to the real conditions of our humanity.
  - c. The conception of the *conditions of sense*, which retrieves the reality we apprehend from the realm of the mystical (though it remains, in a non-supernatural sense, transcendent).
3. The essential importance of a practice of reading and reflection to transforming the experience of reading into *knowledge*. While the experience of the work *per se* may occasion a new tacit integration, it is our efforts to make sense of and to judge the work—to articulate what we apprehend in and through it—which transforms our tacit intimations into knowledge.

### Reading Literature and Knowing

I begin from what I believe to be a common experience: that in reading fiction or poetry, one comes to *know* something—to confront some reality or truth which bears upon our understanding of our own situation or the conditions of human life—a reality or truth which, furthermore, could not have been conveyed merely by propositions or discursive prose. Many literary theorists and critics hold such a position, explicitly or implicitly, but there is little agreement about the character of this knowledge or the “mechanism” by which we acquire it.

In contemporary analytic aesthetic philosophy, the view that literature conveys some truth or reality has come to be called, for better or worse, “literary cognitivism.” Conceptions of literary truth must answer several challenges. One is the question of how literature can be said to *teach* us, since, if we judge what it presents to be plausible, we are referring to something we already know (or believe) (a version of Meno’s paradox). A second question is whether and why we should need literature, rather than just the human sciences, reportage and our own experience, to learn it—that is, whether and how reading literature constitutes a *distinctive* mode of coming-to-know.<sup>1</sup> I propose that Polanyi’s work provides the basis for an answer to these challenges and for a compelling cognitive theory of literature, as well as suggesting a practice of reading by which literature educates us to human realities and to the conditions of sense.<sup>2</sup>

Polanyi's foundational contributions to the philosophy of knowledge are the correlate ideas of the tacit dimension and of "personal knowledge:" that all knowledge, even that which we take to be most "objective" (paradigmatically, scientific knowledge) is inextricably "personal"—that is, embodied in an individual—because it rests on an irreducibly *tacit* dimension that cannot be wholly formalized. This provides the basis for Polanyi's solution to the general problem of Meno's paradox: it is our tacit intimation of a solution to a problem that allows us to look for and recognize that solution. It also suggests that humanistic knowledge can be just as much *knowledge* as what we come to know through science, because the latter too rests on grounds that cannot be fully proved through logic and empirical data.

In his lectures on "Meaning" and the book of the same name into which these lectures were edited by Harry Prosch, Polanyi further develops his account of those "coherences that are thought by us to be artificial, not natural," including those of art, religion, and morality—an account that allows us to believe in the reality these coherences in fact appear to us to have, a reality which in modernity has fallen under suspicion because "they seem to be creations of our own, not subject to the external checks of nature—and therefore to be wholly creatures of our own subjective whims and desires" (*M*, 67). Polanyi sets out to offer "a theory of these meanings that explains how their coherence is no less real than the perceptual and scientific coherences [we] so readily [accept]," a theory which will uphold the legitimacy of the substantial role played by "personal knowledge" in our apprehension of those realities mediated or constituted by culture.

For Polanyi, to find something meaningful is to recognize it as part of a larger whole, and the whole that constitutes the meaning and reality of the work of art (including literature) is an integration of the features of the work (plot, figuration, etc.), on the one hand, and the feelings and experience of the reader (or viewer, listener, etc.) on the other. "[I]n our grasp of the reality of a poem," Polanyi writes,

[t]he poem takes us out of the diffuse existence of our ordinary life into something clearly beyond this and draws from the great store of our inchoate emotional experiences a circumscribed unity of passionate feelings. First the artist produces from his own diffuse existence a shape circumscribed in a brief space and a short time—a shape wholly incommensurable with the substance of its origins. Then we respond to this shape by surrendering from our own diffuse memories of moving events a gift of purely resonant feelings. The total experience is of a wholly novel entity, an imaginative integration of incompatibles on all sides (*M*, 88).

The work of art is therefore a *sui generis* reality, not to be reduced to a symptom of the artist's psychology or biography or historical period or the viewer's purely subjective fancy. But Polanyi does not make fully clear the kind of relationship the artwork has to our lived lives: whether or how it refers to or can reveal something about the world we inhabit, or whether rather it simply creates a new and powerful reality of its own which we experience in our encounter with it. I want to argue that we *do*—or can—derive knowledge about the real conditions of our lives from art, but to see this we need to draw anew from Polanyi's more general theory of discovery and reality, and specifically to apply to literature his argument that inquiry proceeds through perceiving problems and the gradient of increasing coherence that would resolve those problems.

### From Meaning to Reality

Literature can be and has been conceived posing as hypothetical problems that refer to real-world conditions (as Aristotle argued, it is “philosophical”—and mimetic—in that it represents “the kind of thing that *would* happen”). Anna Karenina's suicide, for instance, might force us to recognize certain constraints on the pursuit of personal happiness (as well as the oppressiveness and sexism of 19th-century Russian society); we recognize as plausible her destruction by the costs of her affair and the failure of that affair to conform to her fantasies. I will argue that literature educates by confronting us with problems, though I contend that what we encounter in literature is not just a set of vicarious experiences that are “broadening” (and challenging) simply in the way that real life experiences might be, allowing us to “travel” through other lives and times and places. Beyond this, literature necessarily—by definition—refers us to a reality in excess of everyday reality. It promises a further coherence than that which we ordinarily inhabit, and its form—its plot, imagery, and other formal features—orients us toward this further coherence.

How does it do this? To begin with, even the realist novel and other genres that aim to represent or imitate “real life” differ from life minimally in that they have an intentional form: they are narrated; they have a plot with a beginning, middle and end; certain details and events are included and described in a particular way, implying some principle of unity.

One could argue that this kind of narrative coherence belongs precisely to art and therefore has no implications for our understanding of life outside of art—that art is art because it has *artificial* form. Real life, as it is in vogue to say, is “messy,” full of loose ends and unintegrated fragments and lacking neat resolution. But if human beings are teleological creatures—if we cannot understand human action without reference to both immediate and more distant ends—then the conditions of sense of human life are narratological; narrative arcs are not *imposed* upon human reality, but rather are constitutive of it.

Our lives have a minimal narrative coherence provided by the societies in which we live, but—as I will develop further on—the social narratives we inherit are necessarily inadequate to our experience, typified and sometimes distorting. Narratives make their claim to literary merit in part by offering more adequate conceptions of human ends and the constraints upon and complexities and ambiguities of pursuing those ends within a given situation. (Modernist works work against our expectations of a certain kind of unity, implying the need for a yet different ground.)

But literature's capacity to suggest a different ground of sense and judgment does not just arise from its superior treatment of the complexities and nuances of human experience. More fundamentally, literary narratives and images, if they are truly literary, are not immediately and fully comprehensible—the motives of the characters and the significance of the actions and events are not obvious or unambiguous, nor are the meanings and referents of images and descriptions. I propose that this is entailed by calling a work "literature." If everything about a work appears utterly transparent, if it leaves no uncertainty or question in the mind of the reader, if it seems to suggest nothing beyond what can be immediately understood, either the work is not art or the reader lacks a certain sensitivity.

Thus, in reading literature we are compelled to try to *make sense* of what we read—in two dimensions, the horizontal or syntagmatic unfolding of the story, and the vertical or paradigmatic dimension of the meaning of particular images or descriptions. With respect to narrative, *making sense* means following the story: understanding why A follows B, the significance of each successive action and event and how it reflects back on what came before it—grasping the dramatic problem and understanding whether and how the problem is resolved. With respect to image and description, making sense means grasping what is being depicted or described—understanding its referent, meaning and significance.

At the same time, even what is unclear or ambiguous in a work of literature has to strike us with a certain rightness for us to accept it as art and not dismiss it (this will depend on a certain education and cultivated sensibility, especially for modernist works). That rightness may also be understood as the tacit coherence or integration occasioned by the work—something about this way of representing things allows for the apprehension of new and significant aspects of our experience and the human world. The reality we come to know through the work is the condition of that sense of rightness—the condition of the significant and illuminating connections we find between the work and my life or the world. If I see or read *Waiting for Godot* and find it to be a realistic depiction of something in my experience, fantastic and bizarre as it may be, then the reality I come to know through it is whatever it is about my experience that makes the play seem a compelling representation of it—for instance, the absence of any

transcendent authority or sanction for our lives, and the distortions that arise from that absence and from our longing and need for something to fill it.

It is this ambiguous-yet-evocative character of literature, its representation of human realities through narrative and image rather than its statement of fact through propositions, that makes it so that literature can direct us to a different ground of sense. In Polanyian terms, the work both poses problems and indicates something of the direction in which the “solution” lies—what the character of reality must be such that it can be thusly represented.

Consider the following passage, from Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, describing the passage of the filibusters<sup>3</sup> through the Mexican desert:

That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses’ trapplings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of the men. All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunder-heads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream (McCarthy 1979, 50).

As we attend from the text to what it describes, we dwell tacitly in our knowledge of the English language and of literature from the Bible to Melville and Faulkner, the meanings and connotations of words, the workings of figurative speech, as well as our knowledge and experience of horse riding and Mexico and weather—and fear—and we integrate all these tacit or subsidiary particulars into some comprehensive unified (joint) meaning. If we were reading the passage in context, what had come before (and, if we’d read it before, what came after as well) would also figure in: the rest of the text would be part of the implicit background out of which we read, and part of the comprehensive whole we were working to construct—the meaning of the work as a whole.

With respect to this passage, one might initially think that the comprehensive meaning that integrates its particulars is essentially an action: horsemen riding through a particular landscape (with all the particular features described). But it is not hard, I think, to see that there is much that such a construction does not comprehend.

The explicit object of the description—what it represents—is men riding their horses through the desert, but the passage is *about* something more and other than this.

We sense this, in part, because of the strangeness of the language, even the peculiarity of the syntax—if the passage were just about the action and landscape it describes, then “electric, wild region” would do just as well as “region electric and wild,” and so on. Even more obviously unintegrated in the literal reading would be the figurative references to “absolute night” and “some demon kingdom.”

A more sophisticated reading might say that the passage represents men riding through an *eerie and threatening* landscape, and the language “imitates” that sense of dark enchantment that perhaps the men feel, or perhaps the author just wants the reader to feel—the rhythm of the parataxis (“stark and black and livid,” “trace nor stone nor ruin”) has a hypnotic effect, while “absolute night” and “demon kingdom” evoke an infernal otherworld.

Few, I think, would disagree that McCarthy here weaves a vivid image, however characterized, but the question then is: where does *reality* come into it? If, following Polanyi, we are to see the ambiguities of the passage as clues, to see the passage as “an aspect of reality,” what is the whole, the “comprehensive entity,” of which it is an aspect?

One answer would be *the work*, and it is certainly true that we attend from the particulars of one passage to an understanding of the work as a whole. But it is important to see that “the work” is not equivalent and limited to the text and its meaning; we might call the comprehensive whole the *form* of the work.<sup>4</sup> The form, in this sense, would be what we know—all that we know—when we claim to know a work. It includes the text and its meanings, but goes beyond them. One might say it is not empirical but ideal, as long as this is not understood to mean that the form is some metaphysical object. It is that to which we refer, for instance, when we judge *Moby Dick's* Ahab a tragic hero or an embodiment of evil. On the one hand, the possibility of legitimate argument about such judgments indicates that the form is not given, but something arrived at through the reader's work of integration of the elements of the work into a whole. On the other, the fact that some interpretations are *not* defensible indicates that the judgment is not sheerly subjective. The form of the work, in this sense, may be close to Polanyi's conception of the “novel whole” created in the encounter of work and reader, cited above. But I think the concept of form, with its connotation of both artistic structure and of “ideal form” (as in the Platonic *eidōs*) emphasizes how that “whole” is constrained by factors external to the individual and how the form refers (us) beyond the work to certain realities that constitute objective constraints upon our knowledge: general, if not universal, human realities. This is how the literary work can be not just *integrative* but *educative*: it not only integrates what we know and feel, but may compel us to recognize something that forces us to abandon a previously-held

position, by suggesting a coherence that is more comprehensive or bringing into view a facet of human life we had not known, acknowledged, or integrated—but recognize to be true or real when confronted with it.

As my account of reading the McCarthy passage implies, the work refers us not just to the objects of description within the story but to broader human realities: everything to which we must appeal to make sense of the story and to judge its importance and quality, including the literary tradition and those realities of human history and experience which literature thematizes (in McCarthy, one might say: colonialism, violence, enormity, apocalypse, etc.). Determining whether Ahab is a modern tragic hero or what kind of tragic hero he is requires that we refer not only to the tradition of tragedy but also to whether or what kind of tragedy is possible in modernity, which is a question about (among other things) the possibilities for extremity and greatness and the character of the constraints on human agency in modernity.

The work is a work of *literature* and not just entertainment in part because what it refers us to seems to be both real and important, because it has “something to say about the ‘human condition.’”<sup>5</sup> “Something to say” is potentially misleading—the work is not an encoded message from author to audience, the work of reading aimed at getting back to some original intention of the author. But the point is that the work, if it is literature and not just a historical document, is not just an expression of the author’s beliefs or those of his time, but seems to be *about* something that still has bearing on our own understanding of “the human condition.” And it is that “something” which is the object to which we attend when we read and reflect on the work, if we are reading well.

That is to say, we could see the form of the work in turn as a clue to a further whole which comprehends *it*, as an aspect of some reality or realities—not what is explicitly described but, rather, the indeterminate reality to which the work seems to be a clue, the background implied by the narrative and images, the background against which the narrative and images make sense. I say “indeterminate” because, following Polanyi, that reality is not something given, something “out there” existing independently of the work and of our reading and reflection, our tacit integration. *It is what we come to know in reading, trying to understand, and judging the work*, which can never be exhaustively articulated but which will issue forth in a sense of greater coherence (and, as I will argue, the imperative to develop those capacities that will allow one to achieve a yet greater coherence).

To say that works of literature are those that have “something to say about the ‘human condition’” implies that they do not merely pose problems that demand a higher coherence, but that they indicate the direction in which the solution lies. We refer to reality in judging the deficiencies of a work of mediocre fiction, but good literature evokes the sense of a different order of coherence. It does this along both its

axes, horizontal—the “syntagmatic” or temporal dimension along which the story or plot unfolds—and the vertical—the “paradigmatic” dimension including description, figure, and image.

Plot is an implied coherence based on a dramatic problem and its resolution—the dramatic problem tends, in literature, to be rooted in a fundamental human problem. In understanding and judging the plot of a work we are educated to the conditions under which real conflict arises and according to which that conflict can be resolved—or not (in which case the story must find a different kind of “resolution”). Image, symbol, figure, and the other “vertical” elements of literature work to evoke the conditions according to which the unfolding of the plot makes sense, a “depth dimension” of imperatives, constraints, and realities which exceeds the world as we conventionally inhabit it.

In the McCarthy text, we are forced to seek a whole beyond the representation because otherwise we can’t make sense of—can’t integrate—the strange richness of the language and imagery. The passage evokes a terrifyingly unstable world against which the violence and cruelty of the story make a different kind of sense than that which we would initially attribute to it (simply the acts of barbarous, bad men)—it provides an image of a world bereft of sense and order. But if we come to *know* something about the conditions and tenuousness of human civilization, it is not because he gives us propositions about it—rather, it is the tacit integration that brings together image and story along with what we know about human beings and human history in a new (and potentially terrifying) coherence.

In sum: literature presents us with problems, implying the possibility of a solution, which in turn implies a further coherence, and the particular character of that coherence is suggested—but not given—by the form of the work. The way in which we come to know reality through literature is distinctive, different (though not necessarily radically discontinuous) from how we might come to know it through trying to make sense of events in our own life, because it is through the *activity* of reading, of struggling to make sense of plot and imagery, that we achieve a new tacit integration, not only of the particulars of the text but of the knowledge of human life, experience, and history that we bring to bear in that effort of understanding.

### A Different Kind of Sense—Modern Social Reality

I have suggested that literature educates us to those aspects of “human reality” to which we do not ordinarily attend and which may be distorted or denied in our everyday world and everyday lives. I want now to argue that it makes sense to think of the reality to which we must make reference when we read—at least when we are reading a work *as literature*, rather than as historical document or psychological symptom etc.—as *sui generis*, that is, not just as neglected or repressed pieces of what would otherwise

be our everyday world, but a “different level” of reality. At the same time, I think it is possible to give an account of this reality that is not mystical.

Here too I will build on but go beyond a Polanyian concept: that of “emergence.”<sup>6</sup> For Polanyi, the human world is a *sui generis* reality, dependent on the biological but not reducible to it. But I would suggest that it is useful to make a further distinction within the human realm between the social and a level that transcends the social which we might call “cultural” or simply “human.”

Our habitual ways of making sense of our experience depend upon the conventions into which we are socialized and these conventional understandings often prove to be inadequate to our experience, sometimes radically so. We can understand these conventions to belong to a certain “level” of reality which has been called “socially constructed reality.” In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe how the necessarily reductive typificatory schemes according to which we construe the world—from “marriage” and “justice” down to basic categories of gender—are *functional*, that while they are constrained by material and psychological realities (e.g., aging and death, a mother’s attachment to her children, etc.), they develop so as to support the stability of a particular society and the reproduction of its institutions.

From the constructivist perspective, the “moral sense,” which Polanyi identifies as the emergent property of properly human life, is distinct from animal instincts, but it is still not necessarily the “highest level” of human reality. For the very idea of social constructivism (especially the idea that ideals work to justify existing institutions, which means that they work to justify existing structures of power) suggests the possibility of—and generates the desire for—norms and standards which would not merely be relative to or functional for a given society but would but would be “really normative.” From Polanyi’s perspective, we could see the theory of social construction as posing a problem: if we recognize social reality to be constructed and yet can seemingly view and judge it from a perspective that transcends that construction, whence this perspective? Solving this problem would entail finding a higher level of coherence which would encompass, among other things, our capacity to recognize the social construction of reality, as well as our ability to critique the given norms. And that higher level of coherence would be, in Polanyi’s terms, a new level of *reality* which transcended the functional and conventional level.

It is this level of reality to which, I would argue, literature refers us: the reality that does not merely consist of the conventions that sustain the functioning of a given society, but which reaches back into history, forward into the human future, and “upward” or “downward” into those aspects of human experience that are unrecognized in the everyday social world. These include the normative constraints and demands we feel that are not adequately explained by and may even contradict conventional notions of

goodness, as well as realities such as death, aging, disability, catastrophe, unpredictable eros, inevitable dispossession.

The conventions of every hitherto existing human society have consisted in the kind of necessarily simplifying typification I have described. But I would make a more specific claim about the distortions of modern social reality and the nature of the alternative that we apprehend through good literature. Numerous social theorists and critics of the past century and a half have commented upon the modern reframing of problems in terms of utilitarianism and self-interest, what Max Weber referred to as the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality over value rationality. It may be that “rationalization,” as Weber terms it, has flattened the conventional ways of making sense of things—by which I mean, many things that were once considered holy or valuable in themselves now are increasingly evaluated based on their contributions to individual needs and wants and/or standards of productivity and efficiency, and eliminated or radically altered if found wanting in this regard (marriage, various religious rituals, dress code, social hierarchies). Many things once considered simply real in themselves are explained, or explained away, with reference to evolution, psychology, arbitrary environmental or cultural factors. What remains widely recognized as real is the individual person and her intentions, desires, and passions; what remains widely recognized as good is the pursuit and attainment of those goals and helping others to do the same; what is agreed upon as bad is harming other persons and hindering them from pursuing and attaining their own ends.

I would suggest, then, that making sense of serious literature requires a kind of cognitive shift from this framework—in the first instance, that it requires the recognition of and appeal to a dimension of reality that exceeds our conventional constructions, and that exceeds and sometimes radically opposes the wants and needs of persons. And as the reality of the physical world places a demand on the scientist to know it insofar as he is committed to the ideals of science, literature places a demand upon us human beings to know that deeper human reality. Therefore, this conception of literature issues forth, essentially, in a practice of reading aimed at apprehending the problems that works of literature reveal to us and the higher coherences such works evoke—a practice I would call “reading toward reality.”

### **Toward a Polanyian Practice of Reading**

If one comes to know some human reality through the inquiry provoked by a work of literature, what does this practice of inquiry, this epistemological reading, look like? Our coming to know reality through the encounter with literature may, in the first instance, simply look like recognition—the immediate and intuitive grasp of some reality or truth that had not previously penetrated to consciousness or was not part of the reader’s ordinary consciousness. Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” may

be a paradigmatic case of this—there is nothing difficult about the work in terms of understanding what is going on, but it provokes, demands even, some recognition of the reality of death, of one's own death, a reality we know but do not generally inhabit.

Such truths may not be learned once and for all, but may rather have to be continually relearned. This is not a matter of “forgetting” as one might forget a state capital or how to do long division, but a matter of settling back into the shrunken reality of the everyday, immediate world—the institutional and personal reality of the social world. It is not that one forgets or denies the fact of death, but that one ceases to inhabit a world in which death is a *reality* and slips back into an easy half-denial—an acceptance of the fact of death as construed, as Heidegger would say, by the “they.” “One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us” (Heidegger 1962, 297).

But often we gain little knowledge from our initial experience of the work of art. This is particularly true when the work is difficult or obscure, as with modernist poetry or fiction, such as the McCarthy passage above. Here, too, inquiry must begin with some initial recognition—at least the intuition that there is something there to be known, that the effort will be worthwhile. Such recognition may also come from institutional authority or the authority of the tradition as I may not immediately be able to make any sense at all of an Eliot poem or a Beckett play and will only make the attempt to make some sense of them if I trust those who claim that it will be repaid.

Given that recognition—how would inquiry proceed? The “natural” response to a “difficult” work is interpretation or paraphrase, that is, the attempt to say what the work means, the translation of figurative meaning (broadly understood) into literal meaning. As has been extensively argued, however, it is misconceived to treat paraphrase as the end of reading literature, for this assumes that the formal and figurative features of the work (diction, syntax, meter, rhyme, metaphor, etc.) are all either decorative or part of a code to be broken in order to get at the underlying “message” of the work.

In “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag argues vehemently against this kind of “translation” on the grounds that it strips art of the distinctive depth and reality that it has, and therefore strips the world of this depth and reality as well:

To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings.’ It is to turn the world into this world...The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have (Sontag 1961, 7).

Sontag proposes that “[w]hat we need instead of a hermeneutics is an erotics of art” (14) that would involve attention to and description of the formal features and the sensuous experience of art without trying to extract its “content,” that is, story elements

or ideas which can be stated propositionally—and therefore, by implication, grasped independently of our experience of the work.

Sontag's critique of interpretation is important as a corrective to those who would reduce a work to its meaning, yet "erotics" as she characterizes it is also, I think, inadequate as a method of fully (or as fully as possible) grasping those human realities to which works of art refer. Polanyi shows that our knowledge depends on our efforts to know—on attending to problems, dwelling in all of those facets of experience and knowledge that seem relevant to the problem, and trying to make conscious that intuited coherence which would solve the problem, or at least illuminate its character and contours. Thus, the aim of criticism is not just to allow us to experience the work of art more fully; it is a complementary endeavor to the work aimed at apprehending and articulating those problems which the work makes palpable and the realities which it evokes.

What, then, is the alternative? I propose that a practice of Polanyian reading would involve, first, attention to problems raised by the work, places where the work disrupts our ordinary way of making sense of things, through the character of the language, the use of figuration, or perhaps most foundationally by forcing us to confront realities outside our ordinary experience. Such problems will generally take the form of what seems evocative, surprising, or troubling, yet right—those aspects of plot, descriptions, or formal features of the work that depart from our expectations or wishes, or do not make immediate or conventional sense, but nonetheless seem in accord with a deeper ground of sense. In other words, Polanyian reading begins with attending to the ways in which the work points to some reality of which we have a tacit and partial, but only tacit and partial, intimation.

The next and logical step, then, is the effort to make sense, to resolve or clarify these problems—seeking the coherence of the work that makes sense of the particulars (of the work and of our perception and judgment) and the broader coherence of the human realities to which the work refers—through dwelling in the work and also in those felt relations between the work and other objects of our experience and knowledge. If there is something evocative or mysteriously, disturbingly *right* about McCarthy's description of the filibusters riding through the desert, the image of a place "whose true geology is not stone by fear"—what does that rightness suggest about issues of fundamental human concern? This entails dwelling in the work and also in those felt relations between the work and other objects of our experience and knowledge. It also entails reflection on the *grounds* of our perceptions and judgments about the work. This is to say, again, that the ultimate object of knowledge in this kind of reading is not the work but those human realities to which the work refers. I do not mean to deny that our interest in and enjoyment of literature may have other sources—sheer escape from the everyday world, aesthetic delight—but my interest is in literature as a source of knowledge.

Finally, in the method of reading I propose—reading toward reality—the crucial complement to the experience of reading is the attempt to describe—make explicit—what we perceive. This explicit propositional knowledge does not and cannot replace what we come to know through the experience of the work—it is inextricably dependent on the tacit knowledge embodied our initial response to the work, and thus inextricably dependent on the work of art itself and our experience of it. But Polanyi’s theories suggest that only through the attempt to make that experience and its implications conscious can we integrate what we intuitively glimpse in works of literature into the world as we ongoingly inhabit it, rather than letting it pass away as a transient experience. If what I have suggested about the deficient character of the everyday socially constructed world is correct, this means that the practice of reading is an ongoing labor to inhabit a world imbued not only with greater meaning and depth, but with more stringent constraints and imperatives, including (in Charles Elder’s phrase) “the imperative to consciousness,” the continuing effort to know these realities.

Central to Polanyi’s theory is the idea that there is no independent, external justification of the truths of scientific discovery and this is true of the reality we come to know through literature as well. I have implicitly appealed throughout my paper to the reader’s own experience of literature, and gestured, in my discussion of McCarthy, at the kind of reading entailed. But the validation of the theory must lie in the productivity of an ongoing practice of reading in this way and in what it allows one to find through reading particular works. I submit that the best literary criticism in fact proceeds along these lines: it enhances our sense that through literature we apprehend the deep conditions of sense of human life, and helps us make those conditions conscious so as to live and judge more often and more thoroughly in response to them.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, James Harold (2019).

<sup>2</sup>The philosophical basis for this conception of reading and the epistemology of literature it implies derives largely from ongoing discussions with Charles Thomas Elder of his manuscript, *The Grammar of Humanity: The Sense and Sources of the Imperative to Consciousness*. Its development here is, of course, my own.

<sup>3</sup>Members of a militia who sought to take land in Mexico after the official conclusion of the Mexican-American war.

<sup>4</sup>I borrow this usage of “form” from Elder.

<sup>5</sup>“Literature, unlike fiction, is an evaluative concept and a work is recognized as a literary work partially through the recognition of the intention to present something to the reader that is humanly interesting. . . . The highly valued works of the literary canon are recognized as such because they have something to say about the ‘human condition.’” (Lamarque and Olson 1994, 276).

<sup>6</sup>See Ch. 2 of *The Tacit Dimension*.

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# FORMS OF EMERGENCE



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## ABSTRACT

*In this essay I seek to clarify the unruly notion of emergence by describing three distinct varieties. I suggest that it is often fruitful to ascertain whether what emerges is an aspect of the physical world or a matter of novel meaning rather than quibble over whether emergence is an epistemological construct or is ontological in nature.*

“Emergence is a perennial philosophical problem” (Bedau 2008, 155). Emergentism is a philosophical stance with a history: an early form of emergence is implicit in the Hellenistic philosopher Epicurus’s denial of Democritus’s claim that human choice and behavior can be reduced to the action of atoms. However, in recent centuries the success of reductionist approaches in scientific investigation—cause and effect theories explaining higher level phenomena by the laws of physics and chemistry or by the functioning of a phenomenon’s underlying parts—has increased the temptation to extend reductionism beyond its relevance as a useful but limited tool of scientific inquiry to a general principle of understanding. But it is a foolish denial of personhood to accept an explanation of human thought and behavior that reductively privileges lower level phenomena. Human action cannot be understood adequately by referring to the controlling influence of such lower level factors as appetites, socialization, and genes. Such a view obliterates any notion of personhood and responsibility.

The social and moral shortcomings of scientism, positivism, behaviorism, and other reductionist and deterministic theories became evident in the course of twentieth century history. Emergence theory offers a well-established counter to reductionism

and other one-level systems of thought. However, as Bedau notes, articulating a clear notion of emergence has proved elusive. Is emergence compatible with a scientific understanding of the world? Given that the term is used in many ways, can a comprehensive and coherent account of emergence be formulated?

In this brief reflection, I will argue that the notion of emergence crucially aids clear thought about the structures and processes of reality. I will attempt to accommodate clashing uses of the term by distinguishing three ways in which new properties may emerge in the world. My ideas are most influenced by complexity theory and the thought of Michael Polanyi, who views emergence as not only compatible with science but as a key contributor to a comprehensive understanding of reality.

The key vision common to the various versions of emergence is that new properties arise that, once established, have an integrity different from and therefore not simply reducible to the properties or actions of contributing parts. The emergent entity is sometimes said to be autonomous in relation to its constituting phenomena. Human consciousness is, of course, the classic example of an emergent phenomenon. The content of what we think and perceive is not dictated by atoms, molecules, or even the actions of neurons in our brains. The person's response to what transpires in the world gets interpreted and coded at a lower biological level, but that lower level is essentially a servant of the higher level's interests and purposes. Through language and memory a person can envision different alternatives and choose between them for reasons. It is the person who is responsible for that choice and those reasons, not some lower level phenomena. Our higher level thoughts depend upon and are supported by lower level bodily properties and actions, but are not 'nothing but' lower level phenomena.

Emergence theory recognizes the reality of both the entities and events of an emergent level of reality and the lower level parts or functions upon which the higher level depends (sometimes called the principle of ontological parity). Yet the nature of the relation between the emergent whole and its parts varies considerably. I find it heuristically useful to distinguish between weak, moderate, and strong versions of emergence depending on the degree to which the emergent entity takes on not only different properties than its parts but also responds to different influences or takes on novel functions. The following three types of emergence describe three ways novelty arises in the cosmos.

1. *Weak emergence* exists where the properties of higher level phenomena can be seen to arise from lower level phenomena according to pre-existing natural laws and processes. Weak emergence is weak because there is no mystery about how it arises, but it is emergent because it has properties that its antecedents do not have. As an example from the physical world, within which weak emergence is virtually ubiquitous, when acids mix with bases, they form salts. As a more complex example, the earth's rotation, the rising and cooling of hot air, and topography are among the many

factors influencing the emergence of storm systems. In biology, genes interact with environmental influences and chance events to produce ontogenesis for individuals and evolution for species. An adult person has many properties not found in a four-day-old embryo, but the emergence of these properties through maturation is in principle, if not in detail, comprehensible. The role of natural pre-existing laws, forces, principles or recipes (as found, for instance, in DNA) lead to the emergence of new properties in ways that are theoretically comprehensible. This is bottom-up emergence. Be it noted that in our non-linear world, the notion of dynamic ecological interdependence often seems better able to describe how bottom-up emergence unfolds than the terminology of lower and higher levels.

2. The advent of purpose (conscious and unconscious) within the biological realm gives rise to *moderate forms of emergence*. A bird building a nest would be an example. A nest has an emergent function not resident in the materials out of which it is constructed. Similarly, a person may organize entities with appropriate properties in such a way as to produce desired outcomes. The purpose of the whole is imposed on its parts and is not reducible to the parts' properties in themselves. Machines are examples. Similarly, strategic organization of parts, as in a wheel or a lever, can contribute to meaningful emergent functions. Hence technological innovations count as examples of moderate emergence. In this type of emergence, open properties or features of physical entities (Polanyi calls them boundary conditions) are utilized by a living being for some higher-level purpose. Polanyi refers to such technological devices as manifesting dual control in which a higher-level purpose relies upon the properties of lower level parts even while in its activism it is independent of control by the lower level. Moderate emergence involves top-down control to achieve purposes that are different in kind from lower level properties.

3. What I am terming *strong emergence* is not necessarily based on either top-down or bottom-up emergence, but arises through some novel form of self-organization. Novel self-organization is not a largely predictable process of maturation or evolution like bottom-up weak emergence. Nor is it essentially functional like top-down moderate emergence. The autopoiesis evident in the emergence of life is one example of the capacity of strong emergence to establish new a new level of order in the world. I view the mind-brain relationship as another example of strong emergence, even though no doubt the human language-infused mind emerged through a number of evolutionary iterations. The hard problem of consciousness acknowledges that a mysterious explanatory gap exists between the firing of neurons and the human experience of consciousness. Strong emergence may be fostered by general principles like the breaking of symmetry or the tendency within the natural world to synchronize. Polanyi follows this line of thinking by suggesting "that the *ordering principle* which *originated* life is the *potentiality* of a stable, open system" (PK, 383-384). In any case,

novel self-organization as a complex non-linear process is not strictly governed by pre-existing laws. Rather, it brings into being novel forms of order.

Human experience in Polanyian interpretation offers small scale examples of all three types of emergence. In the process of thinking, many tacit factors, including many of which we are not even aware, are integrated into coherent meaning. The forming of thoughts is a tacitly embodied process, not simply a surface manifestation of logical inference. Thought manifests moderate emergence in that a higher level purpose evokes the requisite tacit parts and processes to support the intended thought or meaning. However, the tacit act of integration forming thought is unlike the conscious control exerted in the construction of a machine and more like a process of self-organization. The act of discovery, experienced as an “ah-hah!”, offers an example of crossing a gap between unclarity and newly organized coherence,

Polanyi argues that the existence of emergence in the cosmos leads to the vision of a stratified universe (*TD*, 50). He also suggests that the comprehensive entities created by emergence can be understood as being comprised of higher and lower ontological levels, although at times he wonders if levels are better understood merely in conceptual terms (see *PK*, 394). But is the alternative of either ontology or epistemology really the most fruitful way to construe what is at stake? Let us examine the levels he distinguishes in delivering a speech to see how they might best be understood. He claims there are five levels in the giving of a speech:

the production (1) of voice, (2) of words, (3) of sentences, (4) of style, and (5) of literary composition. Each of these levels is subject to its own laws, as prescribed (1) by phonetics, (2) by lexicography, (3) by grammar, (4) by stylistics, and (5) by literary criticism. These levels form a hierarchy of comprehensive entities, for the principles of each higher level operate under the control of the next higher level. (*TD*, 35-36)

Clearly no one giving an impromptu speech goes through a process of constructing successively each level as an emergent reality. The process by which the first level emerged occurred in primordial biology; the emergence of the second and third levels would best be determined by anthropologists or linguists, and so on. A person giving a speech would have learned these pre-existing levels formally or informally. This person would begin the speech by attending to the meaning he or she intended to convey. The levels of phonetics, lexicography, etc. seem best regarded as indwelt tacit elements of *meaning* distinguishable through *analysis* rather than ontological levels of a stratified universe or epistemic contributors to knowledge. Ontological parity means that all these levels are real, but intellectual traction is gained only when more precise terminology is used. I believe the contrast between physical reality and meaning, mediated

by embodied understanding, is more robust than the often ambiguous ontology-epistemology distinction. Speech giving is best seen as tacitly involving stratified layers of meaning. Insofar as the content of the speech is emergent, it seems most closely related to moderate emergence in which higher level purpose evokes lower level language.

In conclusion, I believe carefully articulated notions of emergence and due recognition of the importance of meaning analysis offer thinkers opportunities for deep, nuanced understanding of our complex world and its processes. Polanyi understood the importance of meaning (see, for instance, *M*, 178-179), but devoted sustained attention to it too late in life to demonstrate its full significance. He was correct in stating that “the significance of a thing is more important than its tangibility” (*TD*, 33), but he confused matters by saying that significant things like persons and problems are more real than cobblestones. There are degrees of significance but not of reality. Significance is a crucial life-enhancing aspect of meaning. It is in thrall to significance that persons create via moderate emergence the novel meanings and realities that bring ecstatic consummation to life.

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