

# A POLANYIAN ACCOUNT OF WHAT CAUSES INCIVILITY IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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There are many things in Polanyi's thought that help identify crucial conditions for civil discourse. Five Polanyian themes, central to his thought, stand out for me as essential. These five reinforce and, as it were, presuppose each other. Ideally they are pervasively embodied in any tradition of civic culture. They can, of course, be taught, but more in the manner of mentoring and apprenticeship than in any sort of straightforwardly didactic manner, and necessarily within a communal or community-building manner where each participant is allowed a voice, respected, and listened to convivially. The absence of them (it is hard to imagine any one of them being absent and the others not also being absent) directly results in uncivil public discourse.

The first is Polanyi's understanding that *reality transcends our (and every other) explicit conceptual grasp of it in inexhaustible and surprising ways, yet as something we nevertheless can make contact with in its very transcendence*. This is a paradox, but it is not a contradiction. For Polanyi, truth *is* contact with such reality, reality that is always more than what we have succeeded in grasping and representing or ever will have succeeded in grasping exhaustively.<sup>1</sup> In consequence, it draws ever onward to know it more fully. To the contrary, if reality is not understood to transcend our explicit grasp, then there is no basis for questioning a person's explicit claims, no basis for verifying or falsifying them, and no point to do so. So also there is no point to explore further to discover as yet uncomprehended aspects of reality.

Second, *our knowledge, insofar as it is truly knowledge, does indeed grasp reality in various ways and to various degrees, but its grasp is always perspectival, partial, and incomplete—that is to say, its grasp is always fallible*. All representations of reality fall short of capturing reality exhaustively. Our representations are always vulnerable to being found wrong or exposed to be in error in various respects, open to being legitimately questioned and challenged by other claimants to knowledge of the same reality, or of aspects of the reality we think we know but which we may have overlooked or missed. To the contrary, if representations of reality are presumed to capture reality exhaustively, they *must* be true. There is no possibility that they might be wrong. There is no basis for uncertainty or hesitation about them. They can be acted upon without second thought. And we are justified in silencing our adversaries, not just in not paying attention to them.

Consequently, third, *all claims to truth (claims of contact with reality) are to be understood always as affirmed with universal intent, never as actually attaining universality*. No one has access to, or occupies the place of, absolute, unchallengeable truth. This is not to say that there is no absolute truth; it is just to say that no one can rightly claim to possess it (i.e., lay claim to its definitive, final representation), or deny others access to aspects of it (and claims thereof) that lie outside the former claimant's representation. To the contrary, if universality can be presumed unproblematically to be attained, there is no need to consult other points of view. Serious discussion of alternatives becomes pointless, a waste of time.

Fourth, *all members of the community in which one stands are understood and respected to be (in principle) recognizers of reality in common*, to which any individual knower in pursuit of discovery of reality is answerable, which is to say responsible. Reality in its transcendence beyond our fallible grasp is thereby open to be discovered and recognized by other members of the community. No one has the right to claim a complete

knowledge of reality that would cut others off from recognizing and calling attention to other aspects of the same reality. Being open to and acknowledging these others as knowers of the same, common realities is what makes and keeps our knowledge responsible. To the contrary, if other members of the community are not regarded as in principle recognizers of the same reality, though they do not occupy the same point of view, then they can be dismissed as subscribing to some alternative “truth” or “reality”—a position of ignorance, lacking truth, and therefore not worth taking seriously. They have no standing. In such a circumstance our claim to knowledge is irresponsible.

In consequence of the foregoing, fifth, as person-knowers we have, in principle, *the capacity to learn through empathetic indwelling of the (ultimately tacit) knowing that others have* of aspects of the reality we are seeking for ourselves to know more fully. In other words, *we have special need of these other knowers to be coming at the reality in question (the same reality we are claiming to know) independently of us* via their uniquely distinct perspective, and authentically to meet with us and we with them so that mutually we can learn from each other aspects of the reality that is of concern. (My phrasing is drawn from what Hannah Arendt has to say about the nature of commonsense and the public or common world.<sup>2</sup>) They and our dialogue with them are, as it were, an indispensable, transcendental condition (a *conditio sine qua non*) of our claim to make contact with reality in its objectivity. A truly objective grasp of reality happens when this indefinite multiplicity of competent personal perspectives meet and mutually recognize each other’s insights into that reality as those of authentic person-knowers, above and beyond a mere exchange of opinion and information. To the contrary, if empathetic indwelling of the knowing that others have of aspects of reality we claim to know and understand is regarded as impossible, not worth the effort, or a waste of time, then there is certainly no point to include these others in reasoning publically about important matters. They stand outside the truth, they can be presumed as having no access to reality and no participation in truth in common with us.

These five themes—“truths” if you will—are essential to civil discourse. Lack of them is a guarantee that discourse will be uncivil.

A breakdown of civil discourse occurs wherever parties to a dispute adopt a “philodoxic/philodoxical” attitude (see Eric Voegelin on this concept which he derives from Plato) toward favored representations of reality, which conflates the favored representation with truth itself and no longer recognizes the difference (or distance) between the representation and the reality in question (and accordingly sees no point in looking into the reality further to find aspects that might be emphasized by the other parties to the community discourse).<sup>3</sup> For such persons, their map of reality is indistinguishable from the reality in question; their map is territory. As a result, each of the above five points drop out of their understanding of community discourse.

How then is it possible to re-build an understanding, appreciation, and commitment to them? Polanyi doesn’t himself have much to say about such an endeavor once the tradition of civic discourse has been badly eroded or disintegrated.

Sociologist Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart* and the body of work that it has stimulated has a great deal of light to shed on what practically is needed for civil discourse to be established and sustained. Bellah goes back to and builds upon Alexis de Tocqueville’s study of *Democracy in America* and his recognition of the indispensable role in American history of free and voluntary, local associations of diverse people involved in common, local tasks. *Habits of the Heart* traces the antecedents of much of the current breakdown in civility in our nation. I see Bellah’s work convergent with much of what Polanyi has to say. My point is that people need to become participants in free and voluntary, local associations of diverse people involved in

working together on common, local community needs that are not immediately connected with ideological controversies.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>According to Polanyi, truth does not lie primarily in the accurate correspondence of a representation with what it represents but “truth lies in the achievement of a [person’s] contact with reality—a contact destined to reveal itself further by an indefinite range of yet unforeseen consequences” (*PK*, 147).

<sup>2</sup>See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), chs. 7 and 39, and p. 208f. Also see Dale Cannon, “Toward the Recovery of Common Sense in a Post-Critical Intellectual Ethos,” *Tradition and Discovery* 19:1 (1992-93), 5-15.

<sup>3</sup>The concept of *philodoxy* in relation to *philosophy* is discussed in various places within Eric Voegelin’s work. See his *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. By Gerhart Niemeyer (Notre Dame and London: U of Notre Dame Press, 1978); Eugene Webb, *Erich Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle and London: U of Washington Press, 1981); and Eugene Webb, “Faith, Truth, and Persuasion in the Thought of Erich Voegelin,” in *Voegelin and the Theologian*, ed. John Kirby and William M. Thompson (Toronto Studies in / Theology, vol. 10; New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), pp. 356-369. Voegelin’s thought has much in common with that of Polanyi.