

POLANYI'S TELIC VIEW OF TRUTH AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

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In this brief essay, I will suggest that one factor leading to the democracy-threatening fracture in the American body politic has been a weakening and even corruption of the concept of truth. While the debasement of truth is by far most evident in the rhetoric of ex-president Trump, I believe Michael Polanyi would say that many of those who have opposed Trump have also embraced a deficient notion of truth. Ironically enough, the relativistic postmodern perceptualism characteristic of many anti-Trumpian commentators might well be a key factor motivating disaffected Americans to seek the authoritarian rigor of Trump's pronouncements.

Polanyi coined the notion of moral inversion to account for the rise of the totalitarian regimes and terribly destructive wars blighting the twentieth century. Moral inversion results when widespread cultural skepticism and anti-authoritarianism are conjoined with rudderless moral passions. When moral constraints are viewed as but contrivances manufactured to support the interests of those in power, terrorist opposition to prevailing social structures is sanctioned.

Does Polanyi's category of moral inversion illuminate why Trump was elected and has continuing appeal to many? Yes, to some degree, although in a more obvious way with respect to the insurrectionists than in relation to the ordinary people I wish to focus upon in this essay. But the factors in moral inversion now are quite different than the factors Polanyi countenanced. Demographically, Trumpians tend to be older white males, rural folks, those on the lower end of the economic scale, and those without any higher education. In contrast, those infected by moral inversion in the first third of the twentieth century tended to be drawn from urbanites and the most educated layer of society. Ordinary folks first attracted to Trump were usually not skeptical or antiauthoritarian; rather they sought an authoritarian leader who understood their plight. Subsequently, they were recruited by Trump's rhetoric to be skeptical of any sources that do not agree with him. They are certainly not passionate about a new form of government like the Marxists were. Their passions tend toward nostalgic yearning rather than political fervor. They tend to be anti-Democrat rather than anti-authoritarian. Indeed, the unrestrained pronouncements of Trump and his Tweets that do not conform to political correctness may seem like a form of honesty to them. It unites them.

What perplexes many observers is how completely Trump supporters have accepted the self-serving claims Trump has consistently made. Any criticisms of Trump's actions are dismissed as fake news. The ability of data-gathering organizations to monitor the choices people make on the internet and what they say and do on social media has produced unprecedented opportunity to manipulate the information people receive. Directed propaganda and ideology have created political silos. The early optimism that the internet would enhance democratic choice has proven cruelly misplaced. Thus, the scientific objectivism Polanyi saw as defining truth to many in the past century (and which undermined respect for universal values) has been replaced in our time by individualistic conceptions of truth and public political correctness. The same lack of respect for universal values Polanyi noted in positivism, romanticism, and nihilism is again the case in our times, although now dressed in different clothing. We seem faced with either (1) authoritarian declarations of truth that can even reject scientific truth if it is inconvenient, or (2) cultural sensitivity suspicious of any

universal claims such that statements of scientific truth tend to be processed in terms of possible exceptions or outright skepticism. Polanyi's claim that "The world needs science today above all as an example of the good life" (LL 7) would be regarded as peculiarly out of date by most persons today.

What are the concerns of the complex group I am calling Trumpians? The lack of significant policy proposals in Trump's 2016 and 2020 campaign literature makes it evident that his appeal was largely emotional in nature. My home state of Montana changed in the last election from being purple to being uniformly red, so here, at least, that emotional appeal has not been assuaged. "Make America great again!" and freedom from constraint are two of the explicit values Trumpians affirm. The term "again" in MAGA suggest that the emotion is attached to retrieving something that was lost. The emphasis on freedom suggests that what is perceived to be lost are such freedoms as the right to say what one thinks (versus political correctness) and freedom from (federal) governmental control and burdensome change. These concerns are reinforced by the dominant media in Montana's rural areas: talk radio and Fox News. What I heard a woman from a declining rural town say illustrates, I think, what many Trumpians feel: "We hear all the time that 'Black Lives Matter,' but what about us? We don't seem to matter anymore." The combination of resentment and felt abandonment is further stoked by the change in national demographics that seems to many Trumpians to threaten their sense of what it is to be an American with its traditional social values.

Polanyi was quite explicit about how to counter the malaise of his time. "The general foundation of coherence and freedom in society may be regarded as secure to the extent to which men uphold their belief in the reality of truth, justice, charity and tolerance, and accept dedication to the service of these realities; while society may be expected to disintegrate and fall into servitude when men deny, explain away, or simply disregard these realities and transcendent obligations" (LL 57). I believe this statement still holds true for our age. However, the nature of the values Polanyi affirms has been seriously questioned in our age. Because the notion of truth's reality has been especially attacked, let us turn to the details of Polanyi's understanding of truth to see on what Polyanian grounds, if any, its reality may be reaffirmed.

Polanyi's notion of truth is complex and many-faceted. In his 1952 article "The Stability of Belief," he proposes to substitute the term 'belief' for 'knowledge' with "the intention of keeping always open in our minds a broad and patent access to the personal origins of our convictions. By this conceptual reform I hope eventually to eliminate the difficulties inherent in the various theories of truth, whether they rest on correspondence, coherence or utility" (Polanyi 1952, section 3). But is adding "I believe" before stating a scientific theory adequate ground for rejecting any of the traditional theories of truth?

He rejects the correspondence theory of truth insofar as it follows Russell's description of it as requiring identity between one's subjective state and objective reality (see PK 304 for further elaboration). Yet he also claims that "truth lies in the achievement of a contact with reality" (PK 147; see also PK 5, 64, etc.). The theory or formula that adequately expresses this contact sounds very much like it expresses what is meant by the correspondence theory of truth.

He also rejects the coherence theory of truth. He states that "what earlier philosophers have alluded to by speaking of coherence as the criterion of truth is only a criterion of *stability*" (PK 294). Yet he seeks the stability of reliance upon tradition and committed belief. Would he not align his thought to those aspects of tradition that seem coherent and true?

While so far as I know, Polanyi does not discuss the pragmatic theory of truth, his notion that what is true has indeterminate future manifestations has pragmatic overtones. Copernicus's theory is accepted as true because it formed the basis upon which Kepler successfully illuminated the nature of Copernican

planetary orbits—a pragmatic outcome. Yet Polanyi rejects calling a scientific claim truthful if its only virtue is that it has practical applications (*PK* 169).

How, then, is one to understand Polanyi's notion of truth? In his scientific work, Polanyi relied upon the prior discoveries of scientists and his belief in the *coherence* of the scientific worldview. His discoveries of hitherto unknown relationships in the external world, when expressed, manifest a *correspondence* view of truth. But I would argue that that his turn to philosophy was motivated in large part because the coherence and correspondence theories of truth alone were not ultimately satisfying to his sense of significant meaning. His view of truth became multi-faceted, sensitive to purpose and context. Within his "ontology of commitment" (*PK* 379), he affirms an idiosyncratic confessional view that is a variant of a pragmatic theory. On the one hand, he seems to hold that any claim made committedly with universal intent is per se truthful. "Within the framework of commitment, to say that a sentence is true is to authorize its assertion. Truth become the rightness of an action" (*PK* 320). Yet, on the other hand, Polanyi acknowledges the possible fallibility of his or any knowledge claims. Were the confessional view just quoted all he said about truth, then his view would not be significantly different than that held by a serious Trumpian. Polanyi distinguished his science-based view from the Azande worldview by its contact with reality. That is a view based on observation. In contrast, the confessional view is sensitive to meaning and significance. It is founded on "acceptance" (see *M* 149ff). To qualify as true, all claims should be made with "universal intent." However, some claims made with universal intent may ignore truth in order to privilege other values such as compassion, loyalty, or courage. "Truth is the highest object or intention in science—the greatest standard motivation. In political persuasion the highest standard of motivation, perhaps, is what is right or fair in a distributive sense" (*M* 211). He views the political realm as filled with the competing interests of persons seeking power. Nevertheless, the ideal realm of truth, justice, and love is only made possible because its adherents depend on power-seekers and the material basis of civic institutions that also need appreciation (*PK* 215, *M* 213).

If human existence must serve many often-competing values, is there some overarching structure or highest value that brings them into unity and wholeness? Polanyi sought within philosophy a comprehensive vision that would remediate society and avoid the disasters of the twentieth century. Consider the following passage written in 1949 while Polanyi was busy trying to consolidate his diverse thoughts into some coherent order for the Gifford Lectures. He asserts:

our right to proclaim, without loss of intellectual self-respect, beliefs which are admittedly not inescapable. Let me illustrate the point by my own belief in the existence of a common sense of justice between the citizens of this country, which enables them—and will continue to enable them—to solve their conflicts peacefully by *persuasion*. This belief is contrary to the class-war theory, which denies both its premises and conclusions. Both of these conflicting beliefs may be compatible with the facts. Indeed, the first may be less plausible on the face of experience than the second. Yet I shall choose to believe the first, from *loyalty* to the *free society*, which will be strengthened by my holding of this belief, while it would be weakened in the opposite case. It is conceivable that I may prove wrong in the sense that eventually factions and mutual suspicions will prevail and freedom will be overthrown in Britain. Yet my belief will remain the *truer* one. For it is better to have proved wrong while upholding the free society, than to prove right in having helped to destroy it. Such a belief may be called uncritical. But the holding of a belief is an action which, though it must be

decided upon in due consideration of the facts, cannot be determined by the facts alone. An action can ultimately be judged only by *conscience*. (Polanyi, 1949, 359, my emphases)

In this passage, the telic nature of Polanyi's thought is clearly stamped. Truth is understood as belief which advances his moral aim, the establishment of what he terms "a free society." Here the confessional, pragmatic theory of truth, subservient to larger purposes, assumes dominance. Polanyi's career changes from natural science to social science to philosophy can be understood as expressing his transition from a disciplinary emphasis on facts to an emphasis on significance, that is, from a focus on a traditional view of truth to his confessional, post-critical view as that which matters most. His resultant novel understanding of truth is entwined with his interpretation of reality: both are purposive in nature, emphasizing significance such that problems with future manifestation can be said to be more real than stones (*TD* 33). The correspondence and coherence theories of truth provide evidence from the senses and society in support of the larger purpose of living well in a society of mutual respect. This is his vision of a free world in which persuasion based on evidence is prevalent.

For democratic persuasion rather than force to rule in society, trust in the integrity of one's interlocutors must prevail. In turn, trust is nurtured when participants speak truthfully in service to conscience. In addition, all participants must feel that they are heard. More directly put, democracy flourishes when participants speak honestly and listen empathetically. In recent decades, previously *excluded* voices have been heard. This is good. But previously *heard* voices must not be forgotten in the process. If one of the factors generating Trumpian belligerence is its adherents' feeling that they are not heard, attention to their grievances is paramount. All the participants in our democratic conversation need to step back from their favorite form of managed media and listen, in person if possible, to other people's real hopes and fears. Maybe then the real thwarted goals and exaggerated fears prevalent today may be acknowledged and addressed. Maybe then the common values that are woven into our life together, truth included, may once again shine forth and be respected.

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