

THE NECESSITY OF VIRTUE IN THE FREE SOCIETY

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There is a lot of anger and distrust in our political discourse today that it is not limited to one side. Both right and left, conservative and liberal, have a hard time trusting the other side. At times, this distrust has resulted in violence, which is no surprise as much of our political rhetoric is also violent. Frankly, the state of our public life saddens me. But what is to be done? Reading and studying Michael Polanyi for the last number of years, it is natural that I look to his thought for answers. In what follows I offer what I take to be some of Polanyi's lessons for our current time. I only offer a general outline of what I think needs to be done. Much more thought and effort will be required to make concrete what is here offered as only generalized and abstract.

One of Polanyi's central concerns in his writings is the practice of science. Science, for Polanyi, is not a dogma or a specific set of facts. It is a practice. In order to participate in this practice, scientists must assent to and pursue scientific values. These scientific values are cultivated through apprenticeship to experienced scientists. Gradually, the would-be scientist learns to indwell these scientific values. Scientific values become part of the way he sees and understands the world.

Ultimately, Polanyi sees the practice of science as dependent upon the larger practice of the free society. Polanyi writes that "Dedication to the premises of free thought means adherence to some national tradition in which similar institutions have taken root" (*SFS* 71). Free thought is not something that occurs *ex nihilo*, but is instead something that we must be brought into, that must be cultivated. And part of what needs to be cultivated are civic and intellectual virtues. The language of virtue is seldom explicit in Polanyi, but I think it tacitly undergirds much of his thought. In fact, I think much of the language Polanyi uses is highly suggestive of virtue. Consider the following:

A community which effectively practices free discussion is therefore dedicated to the four-fold proposition (1) that there is such a thing as truth; (2) that all members love it; (3) that they feel obliged and (4) are in fact capable of pursuing it (*SFS* 71).

In this passage we see that the free society is dependent upon the metaphysical belief that there is such a thing as truth and is further dependent upon such virtues as love of knowledge, trust in our fellow citizens, and the various virtues necessary to aptly obtain truth. If we examine current political discourse in light of this passage, we find that power has replaced truth. We no longer trust our fellow citizens, particularly those who disagree with us. We are more concerned with political victory and vindictiveness than the persuasion of our fellow citizens. And it is readily apparent that most politicians and citizens do not have the requisite intellectual virtues needed to obtain truth and persuade others.

Polanyi discusses two virtues (he calls them principles) in *Science, Faith and Society*: fairness and tolerance. By fairness, Polanyi means the practice of presenting our viewpoints as objectively and honestly as possible, opening ourselves up to criticism by our opponents. He writes that we "must sort out facts, opinions, and emotions and present them separately, in this order. This makes it possible for each to be separately checked and criticized" (*SFS*, 68). This virtue requires self-knowledge of our motivations and emotional states in holding a particular view, and an openness in sharing them with others for the possibility of

criticism. By tolerance, Polanyi means something different than what is commonly meant by the term. He means something much more rigorous. It is not just accepting the fact that others disagree with you. It is actively seeking what kernels of truth can be found in their position. He describes it as “the capacity to listen to an unfair and hostile statement by an opponent in order to discover his sound points as well as the reason for his errors. It is irritating to open our mind wide to a spate of specious argument on the off-chance of catching a grain of truth in it; which, when acknowledged, would strengthen our opponent’s position and be even unfairly exploited against us” (*SFS* 68). Tolerance in Polanyi’s sense is the capacity to enter into our opponent’s viewpoint, and to attempt to understand it as he does. In doing so, we do not give up our own position but seek to more fully understand and indwell the mind of another who thinks differently. Doing so might alter our position, but it also might help us persuade our opponent to ours. It is a risky endeavor. In this way, we walk the tightrope of conviction and humility, which is I think a central concern of Polanyi’s thought.

A citizenry that has developed and practices virtues such as fairness and tolerance would be a much healthier society than the one we inhabit now. And thus, I think the task of restoring our democracy is ultimately an educational task. We must cultivate in our citizens the belief in and love of truth. We need to instill in them the belief that their fellow citizens also believe, love, and pursue truth. We must also cultivate in them the virtues to adequately pursue it and persuade others of it, virtues like tolerance and fairness. The cultivation of these beliefs and virtues must begin early on. For as Aristotle says, “It makes no small difference, then, to be habituated in this way or in that straight from childhood, but an enormous difference, or rather all the difference” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b).

REFERENCES

- Aristotle. 2002. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Newburyport MA: Focus Publishing.
- Polanyi, Michael. 1964. *Science, Faith and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.