

POLANYI ON NIHILISM, POLITICAL AUTHORITY, AND THE VITIATION OF CONVIVIALITY

Robert M. Frazier

Keywords: Michael Polanyi, Augustine of Hippo, conviviality, authority, common good, nihilism, legitimation crisis, liberalism

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the problem of the legitimacy of authority in philosopher Michael Polanyi's thought. Polanyi provides a model of society rooted in the common good that he calls conviviality. Conviviality creates unity amid perspectival pluralism because of its rootedness in a shared moral vision. The crisis of authority results from the absence of moral ideals that provide cohesion in society. The absence of moral ideals leads to the vitiating of conviviality and ultimately its commitment to the common good. The vitiating that occurs leaves nihilism in its wake, the product of expressive individualism and totalitarianism. In this essay, I explore three issues to clarify conviviality's vitiating. I discuss the nature of conviviality in the first section; liberalism's undoing of conviviality resulting in nihilism in the second section; and political authority and power in the last section.



Questions about the appropriate role of authority in society and what brings about its demise in contemporary culture are driving issues in the political landscape. Several philosophers and theologians provide analyses of the current confusion regarding authority. Habermas contends that “The exclusion of consequential practical questions from the discussion by the depoliticized public becomes extremely difficult as a result of the long-term erosion of the cultural tradition which has regulated conduct and could be presupposed as a tacit boundary condition of the political system,” and this has created a “chronic need for legitimation” (1973, 5). This erosion creates what Nisbet (1975) called the “twilight of authority” in Western culture. As such, the vitiating of culture in which authority vacates its role in providing for the “cohesion or unity” necessary for societies to exist creates a legitimation crisis. If such a need for legitimation exists, one might wonder about the origins of this crisis, offer a way to identify what the crisis is, in this case as nihilism per Polanyi, and consider the conditions necessary for authority to be rehabilitated in culture.

There seems to be a widespread recognition that the legitimation crisis is not simply a political issue and that its roots run deep in a fractured culture. Some contend that the culture itself has taken on a distinctive death-like quality. The Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa writes about “the banality of the dominant culture in which the supreme value is to amuse oneself and amuse others over and above any form of knowledge or ideals” (2012, 131). He continues, “Just to amuse themselves to forget serious, deep, disquieting, and difficult things and to indulge in light, superficial, and insanely stupid pursuits” is what characterizes

the modern world. Llosa calls this the “death of culture” (ibid.). Llosa captures the dismal lethargy of a culture that walks about as zombies, dead to the true, good, and beautiful. A dead culture fails to provide the contours for its own legitimation.

Pope John Paul II calls the state of affairs that devalues the good, the true, and the beautiful a “veritable culture of death.” He writes, “It is no less true that we are confronted by an even larger reality, which can be described as a veritable structure of sin. This reality is characterized by the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity and, in many cases, takes the form of a veritable culture of death. This culture is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic, and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency” (1995, #12). John Paul II then goes on to describe this culture of death as a “kind of conspiracy against life itself.” This conspiracy manifests in a divisive society, a disordered economy, and a rejection of the good lived out in racism, structural evil, and actions that are destructive to life such as inhospitality and abortion.

Others, like Cornel West, account for the failed cohesion in culture and society that provides for legitimate authority by pointing to the pervasive presence of nihilism applied to American culture. In his work *Race Matters*, West provides an appraisal of the present state of Black America. He contends that a death-like toxicity lingers and permeates the Black experience. In the first chapter titled “Nihilism in Black America,” West proposes two main responses to the plight of African Americans in culture from the dominant political perspectives in modern America. He calls these the “liberal structuralist” and the “conservative behaviorist” approaches. Both fail to assess the conditions of Black experience because of the limitations each perspective brings to their appraisal that ultimately hinder them from seeing things as they are. After reviewing the proposals and offering critiques of each, West avers that the problem is nihilism, a kind of destruction of culture and life itself in the Black community. Three features characterize this nihilism: hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. He writes, “Nihilism is to be understood not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world” (1994, 22–23). He frames his analysis against the backdrop of a quote from Richard Wright’s 1949 work, *12 Million Black Voices*. Wright wrote that “We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America” (in West 1994, 17). Although Black culture is numbed by the nihilism that has produced hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness, American culture shares the same banal nihilism with its despairing acedia that masks awareness of its condition. West explores this theme in *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism*, suggesting nihilism’s pervasive presence in American life. He writes that “what is most terrifying is the insidious growth of deadening nihilisms across political lines, nihilisms that have been suffocating the deep democratic energies in America” (2004, 26). West identifies the themes of legitimation, authority, and nihilism in a way that invites a closer examination.

Considering the concerns expressed in West, Pope John Paul II, and Llosa, in this paper I argue that Polanyi provides a persuasive account of the erosion of culture and the absence of proper authority within it in his examination of nihilism. Polanyi contends that the source of nihilism is embedded in political liberalism and its historic development. That development takes two forms. One is associated with the English political theorists of liberalism such as Locke, Bentham, and Mill, while the other is rooted in forms of Romanticism emergent from Rousseau and resulting in totalitarian systems. Polanyi writes, “The curious duality of nihilism makes it a byword for complete self-centeredness (read expressive individualism) and

violent revolutionary action (read Marxism and socialism)” (*LL*, 103). At one point, he defines nihilism as the apathetic absence of a public spirit. Polanyi seeks to reestablish authority by contending for a common belief system of moral ideals that reestablishes the cohesion lost in culture as a result of nihilism.

Polanyi’s perspective assists us in appraising our current cultural *zeitgeist*. In my view, this age’s spirit is the result of the historical and ideational development of nihilism: the attempted annihilation of the true and good and beautiful and their rootedness in the Transcendent Good brought about because of the vitiation of that good. Polanyi adds clarity to what might be a comprehensive account of nihilism by uncovering the ground of this contemporary plight that affects all realms of creaturely existence. To get at Polanyi’s view on nihilism, I consider three main aspects of his position that illuminate the subject. I first explore what I want to call the *reality* that is vitiated by nihilism. Polanyi identifies this reality as conviviality, conjoint life or a life of good fellowship. To explore this I will examine the first part of Polanyi’s chapter on conviviality from *Personal Knowledge*. I then examine the vitiation of this convivial good, what I call the *nihilism of conviviality*, through Polanyi’s examination of the political and philosophical ideas that gave rise to the current crisis. In the last section, I offer some Polanyian suggests for the restoration of *auctoritas* as a substantive idea, and I outline the role it plays in providing political legitimacy in a nihilistic context.

Polanyi on the Good Reality (Society): Appraising Conviviality

Polanyi presents a careful argument concerning the kind of society required to foster the cultivation of personal knowledge as an alternative to the objectivist epistemology of the modern era. He contends that there are conditions necessary for the flourishing of the human knower. These include practices and relationships that enable, in Aristotle’s language, the proper functioning of humans. To flourish and function properly as knowers requires the “tacit component of intellectual passions” (*PK*, 203), and in Polanyi’s view tacit intellectual passions require a social context conducive to these and their development. That social context is conviviality, the good communal and historical reality that must be preserved if knowing is to happen.

Polanyi offers a naturalistic account of the good society in the spirit of ancient philosophy. By this I mean that culture and the good society are natural constructs that humans participate in forming, for good or ill. Unlike modern philosophy that views social organizations as a somewhat artificial arrangement enacted by self-determining agents, ancient philosophy advanced a natural account of the social/political whether we find this in Plato, Aristotle, or Augustine. The modern idea is that social contracts and the institutions emergent from these come about from the desire to preserve the conditions of self-interest by individuals within social life. In Hobbes and others in the social contract tradition, government and other institutions within social life are created to preserve the individual in modern liberalism. In classical philosophy, Aristotle’s famous quip is that “Man is social by nature,” and this reflects the heritage he had received. In Plato’s *Republic*, Plato denies the modern idea that a polis is a compact of sorts that preserves an individual’s self-interest as the source of society and the polis. Plato observes that no two humans are the same, and as such each person has a particular part to play in the whole of society. Hence, humans are not self-sufficient and naturally need others. To flourish and mature according to the natural structure of things, humans require contributions from others. Social cooperation and mutual concern for the common good is the focus of Plato’s republic, and this society is informed by the epistemic proposal advanced by Plato. Malformed societies are focused on individuals, their gratification, and their quest for power and domination, as Thrasymachus asserts in *The Republic*. These features fracture the natural fellowship humans were

designed to enjoy, leading to the vitiation of the good. Interestingly, Plato suggests three individualistic forms of society that pervert the natural ordering of things (Plato 1975, Book II, 367E–372A). He identifies the luxurious society as one where wealth is controlled by a few who then order society and government for their own benefit. Later in *The Republic*, Plato identifies this as a plutocracy, one of the deformed political orders. Another social structure denies equality for all, excluding women from all spheres of society (philosopher kings, guardians, doctors, etc.) so that they do not have honor and authority equal to men. The last kind of malformed society is one in which violence dominates political and economic life and, as such, is at war with itself and others due to its faulty epistemology. Unnatural society is rooted in the individual *libido domanandi* (lust to dominate) according to Augustine in the *City of God*,¹ a theme that Polanyi uses to explore the origins of the nihilistic culture that is the focus of my concern. Polanyi accepts the tradition that sees a good society as an altogether natural affair with its normative structure rooted in the epistemic framework of humanness.

In Polanyi's chapter on conviviality, he sets out to establish the tacit conditions of systems of thought that advance the epistemic agenda, which he has articulated in the first six chapters of *Personal Knowledge*, and clarify the natural social picture of the good society. He sees these "articulate systems" (*PK*, 203ff.) cultivating truth, and he advocates for "coefficients" that enable a flourishing communal life (*PK*, 203). Polanyi believed that intellectual and moral passions are the starting point for the advance of knowledge, as these serve to keep the knower open to, anticipative of, and responsive to reality's disclosure of itself. Proper society fosters the conditions of these passions.

For Polanyi, the intellectual passions are formative, and it is important to keep the shaping influence of some of these in mind. First, foundational to all knowing endeavors is a love of truth. Knowers in the scientific community (Polanyi's primary example of a community of knowers) are driven by their desire to get things right. Second, Polanyi contends for an awareness of beauty manifested in all realms of reality from the structure of a concerto to the unfurling of a flower. The quest for beauty fans the love of truth itself. Third, against the Cartesian tradition that locates the beginning of inquiry in doubt, Polanyi suggests that wonder, the marveling at reality and our feeble attempts to describe it, is what keeps inquiry alive along with the other two passions just identified. As many critics have noticed, puzzling ceases the moment an answer is offered that satisfies doubt. Cartesian objectivism views the satisfaction of doubt as a verified conclusion when certain conditions are met; principal among them is the incorrigible foundational proposition from which all other assertions about reality find their anchor. The error that Polanyi takes note of is that doubt has a limited function; wonder is what keeps one alert and directs one to "future manifestations" of reality. Love of truth, desire for beauty, and the attitude of wonder yield a fourth passion, namely, the passion to avoid error. Avoidance of error functions as a passion but also as an intellectual obligation, a standard that must be met in the tacitly covenanting community for knowledge to advance. The desire to avoid error demands that one become committed to certain intellectual values and standards that make inquiry possible. Without these passions and standards vivifying and indwelling the knower (humans by nature for Polanyi), the intellectual framework of nihilism develops because, as Richard Weaver contends, "ideas have consequences" (this is the title of Weaver's influential book), and the tacit conditions of persons knowing are vanquished. Polanyi views the failure to cultivate these passions in one's upbringing and the structures of society as a dangerous thing resulting in a tendency to develop misformed convictions. As Plato indicated in *The Republic*, children ought and must learn the passions that correspond to the real (1975, 375A–E).

The welfare of human life is rooted in intellectual standards, values, and passions since humans seek to know reality independent of the knower and how it ought to be interpreted. Consequently, in light of the above, humans ought to develop a love for a certain kind of society that yields understanding, liberty, and the cultivation of the intellectual passions. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi writes about “a network of tacit interactions on which the sharing of cultural life depends and so lead to...our adherence to a society that respects truth” (*PK*, 203). This is the focus of his concern for conviviality, the outcome of these interactions one might say. He continues, “Love of truth and of intellectual values in general will now appear as the love of the kind of society which fosters these values, and submission to intellectual standards will soon be seen to imply participation in a society which accepts the cultural obligation to serve these standards” (*PK*, 203). Polanyi, along with the whole of classical philosophy (Polanyi lauds ancient accounts on numerous occasions in his discussion of nihilism), affirms that humans are social creatures by nature and, as such, rightly engage in establishing culture and society and institutions identified with the natural needs of the social self. As a social being, one must “participate” in the cultivation of culture and its institutions. Loving the kind of society that brings about the flourishing of deliberative participation and intellectual passions follows from this set of assertions.

In the chapter on conviviality, Polanyi thus attempts to articulate the kind of society and culture that fosters human advances. Authority has a necessary part to play in its cultivation, as I will later note. However, Polanyi begins his discussion with an examination of the grounds of communication involving the sharing of a common set of articulated symbols and signs that help one make sense of one’s experience. Language is expressive and interactive, and the tacit understanding of these symbols helps create certain emotional attachments to the culture as a whole and to others within it. As an illustration of this principle, when I go to the football games of my high school, as we stand to sing the *Alma Mater*, I, along with other graduates, joyfully sing the words (symbols) of the song, and these elicit the emotions of community, commitment, and belonging. Language learned in social contexts helps foster and perpetuate a particular culture. Proper language will contribute to good society; conversely, violent language will engender destructive cultures. Humans mimic (*mimesis*) those who pass on the symbols and signs with their accompanying emotions, and the culture is commensurate with what those symbols and emotions perpetuate. It is important, then, that the “lore” associated with culture is transmitted through authorities (parents, teachers, clergy, and the like) who love and value the society, hopefully the good society.

Ritual plays a central role in creating the conditions of a convivial society. Rituals help to form and shape the conviviality associated with the good society, which ought to be loved and respected. Ritual fosters cooperation and participation in convivial society. Polanyi avers, “By fully participating in a ritual, the members of a group affirm the community of their existence, and at the same time identify the life of their group with that of antecedent groups, from whom the ritual has descended to them. Every ritual act of a group is to this extent a reconciliation within the group and a re-establishment of continuity with its own history as a group” (*PK*, 211). In other words, rituals are embodied practices in which the values and mutual commitments of a society are enacted. This enacted practice keeps alive the “history of a group” and provides for “coherence” in the group. Polanyi’s use of ritual reminds one of MacIntyre’s definition of a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence” (1984, 187) to the end and goals of those groups. Rituals for Polanyi are essential to the convivial society he seeks. He continues that “rituals are celebrations of convivial existence,” and as such, “they incur hostility of

individualism, which denies value to group life as a form of being” (*PK*, 211). Ritual is deprecated by two dominant manifestations of individualism, utilitarianism and romanticism, which Polanyi will later identify as the prevailing ideas in the process toward a nihilistic society over against the convivial or good society, i.e., “the cultivation of good fellowship” (*PK*, 210).

As Polanyi continues to elaborate and articulate the contours of a good society, he claims that this society will have a particular kind of organization. The kind of society he has mapped out thus far produces sentiments of good fellowship and intimacy. There must as well be an organizational structure to this society that encourages conviviality and fellowship. Polanyi contends that common values learned through communication and transmission foster “interpersonal appreciations laid down by morality, custom, and law” (*PK*, 215). These conditions that enliven shared values serve the “common good” for the society and its inhabitants. He writes that “such sharing constitutes an orthodoxy upholding certain intellectual and artistic standards, and an undertaking to engage in the pursuits guided by them, which amounts in effect to a recognition of cultural obligations” (*PK*, 212). The obligations lay claim to the “value of group life” and elevate the interests of the group and the pursuit of the common good over private interest so that the activities of “subversion and destruction” might be averted from beyond the group. The interests of the group do not always override the interests of the individual, but there are occasions in which this is the case. The good society, the mutual esteeming society, will manifest an interpersonal feeling of fellowship and obligation rooted in a common commitment to law and moral principles, which he will call “ideals,” and in adherence to custom manifested in shared rituals that together serve the social nature of humans as they strive for the common good (*PK*, 215).

To achieve the kind of society outlined here demands organization, and this organization requires that certain conditions be acknowledged. Polanyi writes, “the framework of cultural and ritual fellowship reveals primordially the four coefficients of societal organization.... Two of these coefficients recall the two ways of satisfying intellectual passions on an articulate level, namely by affirmation or indwelling: the first is the sharing of convictions, the second the sharing of fellowship. The third coefficient is co-operation; the fourth the exercise of authority or coercion” (*PK*, 212). These have corresponding realms in which they are exercised: institutions of culture; group loyalty; the economic system; and public power. Polanyi rightly argues that these fit together in the formation of the good society. He warns that when power relations are imposed on a society without the shared fellowship and beliefs in values, passions, moral principles, and law discussed above, this leads to a totalitarian state in which both the individual and the social bond of society are sacrificed. Of course, power relationships are established by determining whose interests and ends are the constraining elements. As Augustine points out in the *City of God*, the power broker seeks to establish the conditions for self-interest to prevail through intimidation, deception, and creating an illusion about society that fosters that end (2003, Book V, 195–215). The mutually supportive coefficients mitigate the fragmentation of society in which one of these, such as power, might prevail. Epistemologically, the fragmentation of our beliefs into compartments isolated from other pockets of beliefs leads to deception and delusion. To elevate power over the other parts of the organization of society destroys freedom and authority, and this is what occurs in badly formed contexts.

Finally, Polanyi explores the role that moral beliefs and rules play in sustaining the good society. Moral beliefs and rules enable agents to make good judgments within a culture, whether individual or civic. He writes that “we see that while some systems of social lore are cultivated for the sake of our intellectual life as individuals, others are cultivated by the act of ordering our lives socially in accordance with them” (*PK*,

215). It is ordering lives accordingly “by the same morality, custom, and law which conjointly constitute the *mores* of their society” (*PK*, 215). The moral convictions and passions that people in a given society share and then live out through practice and ritual form what Polanyi calls the civic culture. These values need to be embedded in the citizenry itself so that they might become free, deliberative agents working cooperatively and civilly with other members of society. The ongoing clarifications of the moral ideals are fleshed out through dialogue and shared life, providing those in authority the framework to apply the ideals in decisions about the culture. Polanyi contends that “the constitution of a free society expresses its acknowledgement of these passions and standards. Its government (the fourth of the coefficients of the social discussed above) bows in advance to the moral consensus freely arrived at by its citizens...because they are deemed competent to decide rightly as the authentic spokesman of the social conscience” (*PK*, 223). Although the moral ideals of a civic society (such as virtue, justice, and prudence) remain somewhat constant and are exercised in pursuit of the common good and conviviality, the innovative application of them in law and custom produces the evolution of a society.

Polanyi uses law as an illustration of the confluence of moral ideals, standards, and passions mentioned above. He sets out to offer a brief but telling critique of the dominant legal philosophy in his day, legal positivism. He defines legal positivism as the theory “which refuses to qualify in any way the ultimate authority of the basic norm of a given legal structure” (*PK*, 223). In other words, legal positivism describes the current state of law without appeal to an overarching conception of the good or independent realities like virtue, justice, and prudence. The kind of analysis that Polanyi has offered in terms of the convivially good society that provides for the conditions of legitimation is vacated, leaving the social structure in the kind of perpetual crisis mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper. Polanyi offers an alternative to philosophical positivism that advances that only statements empirically verifiable or mathematically demonstrable are meaningful, and hence, statements of value and religion are empty, vacuous. Polanyi has shown the contrary; such statements of value and commitments to them are required for the common good and for the intellectual enterprise necessary for its continuation. Later, Polanyi will identify legal and philosophical positivism as rooted in a fundamental nihilism.

In the opening sections of Polanyi’s chapter on conviviality, he has laid out the contours of the kind of good society that will promote the public spirit. To be dialogue partners in this realm requires the cultivation of intellectual passions along with guidance from intellectual standards that have been forged through learning communities through the years. Polanyi claimed that love for a society that cultivates these must ensue. I have summarized these contours in what precedes. Polanyi contends that what I am calling contours (what he has identified as articulate systems) must be indwelled by those seeking the good society. In his article “On the Modern Mind,” Polanyi claims that “indwelling operates on all levels of society” and that we “rely on the conditions of indwelling as one seeks to be aware of the ‘coherent reality’ that one seeks” (1965, 17). In my forthcoming discussion on the demise of the conditions of love of a particular convivial society, I will call this vitiation nihilism.

Nihilism as the Vitiating of “Conviviality”

Polanyi explores the ideas behind the development of nihilism in a variety of places in his works. These appear as independent articles and chapters or parts of chapters in his books. For example, in *Personal Knowledge*, in the chapter on conviviality we examined above after looking at the contours of the good society to be loved, Polanyi discusses power politics and how totalitarianism emerges from misplaced power.

(It is important to note that totalitarianism was a great concern for Polanyi and certainly related to his own experience. Totalitarianism is one type of political system that results from nihilism.)

Common features are found in many of these pieces. Two dominant features frequently appear. First, Polanyi provides a historical framework to understand the development of nihilism. If ideas result in actions, attitudes, and habits, then identifying these ideas is necessary for historic comprehension. Although Polanyi is critical of Hegel as contributing to the development of nihilism, Polanyi's position is like Hegel's contention that the *zeitgeist* manifests historically in the forms of social life. The second feature is that Polanyi contends that liberalism in its initial modern form championed two things: an anti-authoritarianism that rejects tradition and authority as important in forming intellectual life; and philosophic doubt or skepticism as the starting point of all inquiry. The former results from the latter. Hence, Polanyi contends that liberalism, its development and main ideas, is the culprit behind modern nihilism. Polanyi writes that the political motives that produced totalitarianism were "supplied by the liberal movement itself, wherever, unrestrained by proper authority, it degenerated into nihilism" (2016, 201). In what follows I will explore these two dominant features, keeping in mind that nihilism is the vitiation of the good society worthy of love, and such a society has no public spirit.

Historically, the roots of liberalism that lead to nihilism begin with the Renaissance and its emphasis on classical culture. Renaissance culture, according to Polanyi, advocated a "liberalism resembling pre-Christian antiquity" (*LL*, 93). Had this form of liberalism with its emphasis on "freedom of thought" prevailed without cooption from modern liberalism, liberty would have been present "everywhere." It was the Ionians in the sixth century who advocated this kind of liberalism with its "emancipation of the human mind from a mythological and magical interpretation of the universe" (*LL*, 10). (Polanyi tempers this view a bit because he recognizes that the Ionians elicited a response in an ancient form of skepticism that impeded liberty of thought.) This early modern vision of liberalism soon met with the fracturing of Christendom and the religious wars that resulted (*LL*, 94). The liberalism that emerged from these wars turned on a kind of "detestation" of "religious fanaticism" that was present in the religious wars (*LL*, 94). The emergent form of liberalism "appealed to reason for a cessation of religious strife" and advised to look for non-religious solutions to the animosity that remained between Protestants and Catholics (*LL*, 94).

The reason-based foundation of liberalism, which became known as the Enlightenment, developed into a secularism that would, in the course of time, encompass all of Western culture. The result of the detestation of religion in response to religious hostility was a sign that "manifested" itself in the rapid secularization of Europe in the eighteenth century. The messianic zeal that was a component in the expansion of historic Christianity continued in liberalism itself, but without the foundation of Christian moral ideas. Further, the growth of liberalism took two forms. One of these was the British version inspired by the work of John Milton and John Locke, while the other was rooted in Voltaire and the French encyclopedists. The Lockean/Miltonian form provided the philosophical framework for the evolution of the new science that "served as a major example for emancipating knowledge from religious dogma" (*KB*, 5) and the metaphysical/teleological framework of Aristotelean cosmology forged in Catholicism via St. Thomas Aquinas. In other words, the kind of secularization mentioned in the previous paragraph was fostered in society by the scientific commitments of Newton and Galileo.

The French Enlightenment had a secularizing trajectory distinctive to its philosophical commitments. Polanyi suggests that its mood was principally hostile or "angry" to religion, especially the Roman Catholic Church, which had dominated French culture for centuries. He says that the French Enlightenment moved

to a more “extreme position” (*LL*, 95). The French reaction promised that there would be “relief from all social ills” (*LL*, 95). Adopting Lucretius’s dictum, “*Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*” (“what evils religion has inspired”) (*LL*, 95), the French perspective took a much more radical and aggressive approach to clerics and the church in general. The confidence this movement had in the purity of human life rooted in reason over against the church came to a watershed moment in the work of Rousseau. Rousseau believed that society had corrupted the innocence and dignity of human life. Consequently, although Nietzsche would later write that one needs to move beyond good and evil, Rousseau contended that the more important focus should be on humans “before good and evil.” That is, humans were good, innocent at the beginning, but, like Emile, society corrupted them. He contended that “man’s original virtue had been corrupted and his person enslaved.” Consequently, to gain the kind of liberty and freedom that the Enlightenment liberalism promised required a deference by the society to a common power that mediated the “general will” of the people by creating the very conditions necessary for the rational liberation of humans. The common power represented the form of the social contract of individual wills clamoring over their impotence and consequently needing to have some other agent mediate on their behalf. For Hobbes, and ultimately this tradition that Rousseau presumes to be the case, subjects cannot change the form of government once adopted and must submit to the rule of the sovereign charged with preserving them from the hostility of another—a harkening back to the religious wars that gave rise to the modern form of liberalism. One gives over the power of self-determination to an all-powerful sovereign reminiscent of Hobbes’s sovereign in the *Leviathan* (1968, Book Two).

There are clear negative implications for the kind of society Hobbes envisions, which replaces the model where the *polis* ought to be loved so that conviviality might ensue. The sovereign in this system develops laws that by necessity must be followed by the members of the *civitas* who fear violence from another. Those disobeying these laws would face punishment. Further, the sovereign, since he makes the laws, cannot be condemned by the laws, hence placing him above or beyond the law. These laws are not necessarily grounded in the ongoing moral ideals expressed in law and conviviality. More so, they represent principles established by the sovereign because of their pragmatic value in preserving members of the polis from a violent and sudden death, the foundation of the Hobbesian social contract model. Given the power associated within the social contract, the sovereign masks his motivation to satisfy self-interest and enacts laws to protect his status. Polanyi points out that Rousseau adopted the Hobbesian model of sovereignty, based on the sovereign’s representation of the general will of the people. In Hobbes, this mode of governance is sustained by the darkness and fear of humans within a society. Rousseau, although supporting the status of the sovereign like Hobbes, locates the cohesion of the socially contracted society bound together by the general will; this is his romantic view of human life. Recalling that Rousseau believed “man’s original virtue had been corrupted,” Polanyi sees him unleashing a “moral fury” that attacked “all that is of good repute; all accepted manners, custom, and law” (*KB*, 6). Rousseau’s romantic commitment to individualism (a central dogma of liberalism as we have seen) gave rise to its application to a nation (which is led by a sovereign who mediates the general will), adopting individuality’s claim to “realize its own powers” (*LL*, 100). The sovereign who leads a nation combines the notion of the “supremacy of uniqueness” (individualism) with the unique “national destiny” of the people. This requires an “absolute allegiance of all its citizens” to the state. The sovereign in this Rousseauian schema “stands entranced in the admiration of his own uniqueness, while identifying his personal ambitions with the destiny of the nation lying at his feet” (*LL*, 100). This leads to the social form of nihilism identified as “nationalism” (*LL*, 101).

The historical unfolding of the rejection of conviviality results in social nihilism. The nationalistic spirit that results from Rousseau's romanticism is spurred on according to Polanyi by scholars like Marx and Hegel—Hegel with his justification of nationalism in his philosophy of right and Marx in his historical materialism. These forms of nihilism vacate the hopes of the free person that emerged during the Renaissance.

To sharpen my Polanyian analysis of nihilism's rejection of conviviality, we turn now to the basic principles of the liberalism he rejects. In Polanyi's view, the dogmas of modern liberalism inevitably led to the rise of romanticism, nationalism, and historical materialism, in a word, social nihilism. He writes, "The ideology of total revolution (i.e., French) is a variant of the derivation of absolutism from absolute individualism.... For this purpose you must take power." And "to achieve a comprehensive improvement of society you need comprehensive powers" (*KB*, 13), i.e., absolute sovereignty. Secularization led to the notion of an absolute sovereign in the French appropriation of the revolutionary spirit that gave rise to the romantic form of nationalistic sovereignty, and this culminated in the Hegelian and Marxian *reich* and historical materialism.

Moving on, Polanyi locates the key dogmas of British liberalism in the works of Milton and Locke. Although this highlights "Anglo-American liberalism" in his critique, Polanyi is quite clear that the notions of European liberalism are grounded in these principles. A common account of the principles of liberalism is found in *The Logic of Liberty*, "Authority in a Free Society," and *Meaning* as well as other works that address this issue. He writes, "Anglo-American liberalism was first formulated by Milton and Locke. Their argument for freedom of thought was two-fold" (*LL*, 94). Milton contributed the first principle, which Polanyi calls "anti-authoritarian." Polanyi writes that "its programme was to let everyone state his beliefs and to allow people to listen and form their own opinion; the ideas which would prevail in a free and open battle of wits would be as close an approximation to the truth as can be humanly achieved" (*LL*, 94). He continues, "this is the anti-authoritarian formula of liberty" (*ibid.*). Agents can stand apart from their traditions and evaluate assertions independent of these. In the history of epistemology, Milton accepts an aspect of Cartesianism that is identified as internalism. This aspect holds that one has the capacity to set aside beliefs held as a kind of unencumbered observer and perceive each inferential connection without reference to these background beliefs. This position breeds distrust of authority and promotes the autonomous rational agent capable of assent without reference to tradition (*LL*, 8, 15).

The second principle is derived from John Locke, who is often cited as the father of modern liberalism. It claims that one should occupy a kind of philosophic doubt as one considers competing claims to the truth. This position makes two assertions. The first is that the reason one should exercise philosophic doubt is because one ought not to believe something unless it has significant and substantial adjudication. To accept something based on tradition or authority is to violate one's intellectual duties. This yields the second aspect of the principle of philosophic doubt: that "we can never be so sure of the truth as to warrant the imposition of our views on others" (Polanyi 1949, 348). Of course, this implies that authority is an imposition of beliefs from one to another, but it also renders suspicious positions that the most reliable agents might render. These together express the dominant position in modern culture, suggesting generally that one should not believe something without adequate substantiation. This might be called the modern ethics of belief; to violate these conditions is to believe immorally and to flout one's epistemic and political duties. Polanyi's work revisits an important insight from the classical writers that one's politics is built on one's epistemology and metaphysics. I believe that it is quite instructive that after Polanyi discusses conviviality, he follows with a critique in *Personal Knowledge* of what I am calling the ethics of belief rooted in Locke and modern epistemology.

Polanyi sees this approach to questions about morally permissible beliefs as yielding what he calls positivism. A feature of positivism is its confidence that one can have full access to one's belief states, and unless these are verified empirically, such beliefs states are meaningless. Although not by name, Polanyi addresses the inadequacy of internalism. In Section 5 of "The Logic of Affirmation," titled "The Personal Mode of Knowing" (*PK*, 252-253), he uncovers this inadequacy. He writes, "I must admit now that I did not start the present reconsiderations of my beliefs with a clean slate of unbelief. Far from it, I started as a person intellectually fashioned by a particular idiom, acquired through my affiliation to a civilization that prevailed in the places where I had grown up. This has been the matrix of my intellectual efforts." Tacitness implies that "I could explore my meaning up to a point, I believe that my words (descriptive words) must mean more than I shall ever know, if they are to mean anything at all" (*PK*, 252). In a beautiful and telling passage, he writes, "A truthful statement commits the speaker to a belief in what he has asserted: he embarks in it on an open sea of limitless implications. An untruthful statement withholds this belief, launching a leaking vessel for others to board and sink in it" (*PK*, 252). The vessel metaphor is interesting considering Clifford's earlier use. For Polanyi to disregard and not see the positive status of stable beliefs without the full-blown access to these is to sink. In the end, "objectivism requires a specifiably functioning mindless knower" (*PK*, 264).

In the chapter titled "The Critique of Doubt," Polanyi brings into focus the misuse of the objectivist's epistemic internalism. He contends that "the ideal of a virgin mind is to be pursued to its logical limit, [and] we have to face the fact that every perception of things, involves implications about the nature of things which could be false" (*PK*, 296). The inferential access of the internalist is limiting the grand possibilities of comprehending a deeper appreciation and critical apprehension of the beliefs one holds. Given that one "embodies" the context of one's past and culture, Polanyi asserts that changes and alterations happen within it as one indwells one's beliefs, and this is a good thing. The idea of an ethics of belief that requires satisfaction of doubt prior to assent does not take into account intellectual passions that keep alive the hope of seeing new things in old and of pursuing the indeterminate future manifestation of a reality that keeps alive the prospects of inquiry. For Polanyi, rationalism has promoted a skewed sense of doubt that in the end is "illusory." There is indeed a positive place for doubt in the fiduciary *programme* that Polanyi promotes that does not require the impossible task of suspending one's beliefs. It requires a rejection of the internalism implicit in the dominant critical tradition of the ethics of belief.

A third area of criticism pertaining to the critical notion of an ethics of belief is found in what George Mavrodes called the "threshold" requirement of this tradition. The threshold requirement suggests that unless sufficiency is met, one is immoral in holding a belief. Determining that level of sufficiency is behind what Locke averred as the proportionality principle, which was rooted in his conception of probability. For Polanyi, this idea distorts what commitment entails in believing. This "regulative principle" denies, disguises, or minimizes the fact that one is already holding a belief prior to beginning an examination of it (*PK*, 307). To believe is risky business; one has "staked his life" in commitment to something. Polanyi further contends that "to postpone decisions on account of their conceivable fallibility would necessarily block all decisions for ever and pile up the hazards of hesitation to infinity. It would amount to voluntary mental stupor. Stupor alone can eliminate both belief and error" (*PK*, 307). The threshold requirement, as the objectivist tradition of an ethics of belief contends, would create a "strict skepticism" and "deny itself the possibility of advocating its own doctrine." Its realization is "unattainable."

Considering this discussion of the ethics of belief and the priority of fiduciary considerations and the barrenness of the modern position, Polanyi shows the implications of such a position. He writes, "The

argument of doubt put forward by Locke in favor of tolerance says that since it is impossible to demonstrate which religion is true, we should admit them all. This implies that we must not impose beliefs that are not demonstrable” (LL, 97). Polanyi is concerned about what beliefs might fall in the category of the indemonstrable and concludes that ethical principles are this kind of belief. And so the implication of the Lockean position is that one must refrain “from imposing them and should tolerate their total denial” (LL, 97). But if ethical principles cannot be held without recourse to empirical verification, then “you cannot prove the obligation to tell the truth, to uphold justice and mercy. It would follow therefore that a system of mendacity, lawlessness, and cruelty is to be accepted as an alternative to ethical principles on equal terms” (LL, 97). This kind of liberalism with its conception of freedom ultimately destroys the “field of traditional ideals” (ibid.). As these values and norms are derailed from framing society, the conviviality necessary for the good society is vitiated.

Several other principles emerge from British liberalism that contribute to the growth of nihilism. The confidence in progress and rationality leads inevitably to belief in the melioration of culture and the cessation of the animosities embedded in religion. Further, Polanyi points out that in the absence of transcendental ideals for the moral life, pleasure and pain are elevated as the source of the moral life. This emphasis on pleasure and pain yields John S. Mill’s assertion that “utilitarianism” is the ethical system that accounts for the origin of ethics in pleasure and pain. This gives an Anglo-American framework for promoting the rise of nationalistic supremacy discussed above.

Polanyi’s perspective aids us in recognizing two other Anglo-American positions that support this move. The first is from Locke and the second is from Mill. In Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he draws out the implications of the philosophical voluntarism that emerged in the late medieval period. By this I mean that a significant focus of thought occurred metaphysically in what Charles Taylor calls “disembeddedness” (2007, 148–158). Disembeddedness is the shift from seeing all that there is as receiving its life and being sustained in life by its participation in the Divine. As the poet Posidonius suggested and the Apostle Paul affirmed, “we live and move and have our being in God” (Acts 17:28), and all things hold together in Christ (Colossians 1:17). This historic position provided an anchoring of the transcendental ideas that Polanyi makes much of in discussing conviviality and the love of the good society. Disembeddedness elevated the will to a place of supremacy in human life. Locke takes up this position on the will and claims that it is the capacity and power to determine self, one’s values, and one’s action. The implication is that no longer must one ask the question of who is mankind by appealing to God as his origin; the power of the will in self-choosing and in self-identity is the determining factor. And freedom or liberty is absence of constraints on the will to self-determination over against the Augustinian principle that freedom is to live in submission to the true and good and beautiful (Augustine 1964, Book II).

If this determination of self is foundational for liberalism, then it is quite clear that Mill’s harm principle follows. His principle claims that actions of self-determining agents are permissible insofar as they do not harm someone else in realizing self-determining desires and wants. The will is the power to make such choices about the self and the self’s interest, and this should be unencumbered until it impedes someone else from achieving the same. Polanyi views these things as part of the radical individualism that is intrinsic to liberalism.

Contours of Political Authority

In the present context of political theory, numerous writers have voiced concern over the demise of authority in the *publica*. As noted earlier, Robert Nisbet describes what he calls the “twilight of authority” in his book by that title based on the compromised political yearnings of citizenry coupled with the rise of the bureaucratic state. And as referenced earlier, Jurgen Habermas laments what he calls the legitimation crisis that has resulted from a lack of moral framework and served to define what is warranted and not warranted in the *civitas*. He writes, “the exclusion of consequential practical questions from the discussion by the depoliticized public becomes extremely difficult as a result of the long-term erosion of the cultural tradition which has regulated conduct and which, until now, could be presupposed as the tacit boundary condition of the political system. Because of this, a chronic need for legitimation is developing” (1973, 5). Hannah Arendt blames the confusion over authority on the severing of political life from the older, classical tradition of republicanism that gave society stability and resolve. She writes, “Its loss (authority) is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world” and consequently its annihilation. Authority, she contends, “gave the world permanence and durability” (1961, 96). Finally, Richard Friedman locates the loss of authority in the failure to establish the grounds of cohesiveness in society: belief or rules (1973, 122–123). These positions suggest that we seem to be at a loss to distinguish and define what authority entails. I contend that we might learn again from Augustine’s view of power and authority, which is rooted in both the biblical and philosophical traditions, and then explore its insights in light of Polanyi’s concept of conviviality.

In a nihilistic social realm, asserting any grounds of authority is illegitimate, and one might claim that one cannot regain the grounds of legitimacy via the illegitimate grounds of social life that obtains in the two forms of liberalism suggested above. Further, in place of legitimate hegemony, power fills the void vacated by proper authority as the production of intended ends, as Russell argues in *Power: A New Social Analysis* (1975, 25), which serves the interest of the one with power over against the common good essential for inclusive conviviality. We see this kind of analysis in *The City of God’s* replacement of authority through an examination of Augustine’s concept of power. Augustine views power as a multi-dimensional and potentially retrogressive idea. Retrogression occurs when the character of the one in power is increasingly characterized by the vice of pride manifesting itself in *libido domanandi*, the lust to dominate. When retrogression occurs, power as *libido domanandi* directs the institutions, laws, narratives, and attitudes of the *civitas* toward its own end, not the end of the commonwealth. So the full picture of power, a term of influence for intended effects, involves four elements: the motivation of the one in power; the question of whose interest is at stake, the character (virtue or vice) possessed by the power broker; and the types of responses given by those subject to the power broker. Power, in its coercive form, is indeed the result of the growing nihilism of the vitiated *shalomic* design captured in conviviality (Augustine 2003, Book XIX).

For Polanyi, authority is a necessary component of the model of conviviality that he presents. And we might say as well that conviviality is necessary for authority to function in the right way. I suggest that authority is a relationship between two or more persons in which one is identified as superior and the other(s) is (are) viewed as somehow inferior in that relationship. To say that one is superior is simply to recognize that one brokers the relationship with another whom we might identify as the subject of that authority. Of course, those subject to another’s authority must recognize that the broker bears the marks of authority, discussed below. “Authority” is a term of relation in which one, the superior, influences the other to believe and/or to perform actions in ways commensurate with the authority’s directive. The motivation for the

authority derives from his/her concern for the interests of those subject to that authority in the context of the *publica*. The subject of authority, for this relationship to obtain, must give his/her consent to the plan of action or belief proposed by the bearer of authority. One further observation: given that authority is a surrendering of one's private judgment, the subject of authority bears responsibility for recognizing that the bearer of authority manifests the mark of authority. In other words, the subject in authority relationships is not intellectually passive. In proper authority relationships, the bearer of authority covenants and promises with the subject in that relationship to mediate, induct into, and interpret some field/realm/area for the welfare, the good, of the other. In proper relationships of this kind, the bearer seeks to usher the subject of his/her authority into the arena that together they might bear mutual authority. Unlike power relationships where the goal is the perennial inferiority of the subject of that relationship to serve the ends and interests of the one in power (the political nihilism effect), in authority relationships, the design is to enable the subject to indwell the values, laws, traditions, standards, and the like of the convivial society.

Polanyi commends the priority of belief over rules in authority relationships that serve conviviality. Common beliefs are located in the tradition of an affiliated group. Shared beliefs provide a cohesive purview on which members of a community rely, and an authority is one who has been formed by them in such a way that he/she can speak from the tradition to guide others. The interpretive mastery of a tradition with its particulars serving the larger scope of known things is at the heart of authority. Knowing the tradition in the Polanyian sense that one indwells the aspects of it enables tradition to function in a "transparent" way (Cochran 1977, 555). This "allows reality to shine through" (*ibid.*).

Tradition is inadequate on its own without authority. One must adopt the value and perspective of the tradition in a community, and this is done through its authority structure. Cochran continues, "The learner must 'affiliate' himself to a community that cultivates the tradition of knowledge to which he aspires, that appreciates its values and strives to act by its standards" (*ibid.*, discussing Polanyi's discussion of tradition and authority in *PK*, 207). The convivial order "makes fellowship, communication, and participation in joint activities possible." Cochran writes, "Authority is necessary to keep the community together and to keep it directed toward its end. Authority is necessary to suppress deviation through mutual control, but even more basic is its function in pointing to new possibilities for discovery with the tradition" (*ibid.*). The vital role of authority is to foster unity and thereby sustain it as a community and to order things so that new possibilities for discovery within the community have a foundation.

Polanyi supports these claims in "On Liberalism and Liberty" (*SEP*, 199–209). About tradition or received knowledge, he writes, "all formulations of liberal principles (ones that are necessary for the convivial society) must derive their meaning from a prior knowledge, diffused inarticulately among the citizens" (203). Further, "the political and moral authority correlated to freedom is the authority of this tradition" (203). Since civility is required in society and is a mark of conviviality, "authority ensures civil intercourse, disseminates a widespread sense of public responsibility, and fosters affection for one's own people" (203). Without legitimate authority's guidance, the nihilistic "malaise" of society might spread. Consequently, legitimate authority is rooted in the transcendental moral ideals discussed earlier in this essay and supplies the moral framework that Habermas fears has been lost in the modern world.

Authority is necessary for the convivial community and can be understood in the old Roman notion of "*auctoritas*." In terms of this old notion, authority in Polanyi's convivial community claims a right to be believed given that the one who exercises proper authority bears the mark of indwelling and participating in the tradition of beliefs required for such a society. An authority promotes the beliefs of the community,

as these reflect the truth and the transcendental ideas that undergird all of reality. The notion of authority makes meaningful the life, shared rituals, and language of a community. This kind of authority directs the community toward the common good of the community and reveals their shared values.

I have suggested in this paper that without legitimate grounds for the social order, the legitimation crisis of the moment will not be solved. In this crisis, we simply cannot continue to hold to the forms of shared life that vitiate conviviality, the very framework that makes life together possible and beneficial. Nihilism is the pollution or degrading of shared life convivially in and through tradition, shared beliefs, values, ritual, law, communication, and truth. This convivial life makes possible the continued discovery of presently indeterminate revelations of the ultimate order of things. For this to occur, a restoration of the idea of authority divorced from power that serves its own ends and not the common good is needed. Polanyi points us in the direction of such restoration.

ENDNOTES

¹Augustine takes up this idea in the introduction to the *City of God* and uses it throughout the text.

REFERENCES

- Arendt, Hannah. 1961. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Viking Press.
- Augustine of Hippo. 1964. *On the Free Choice of the Will*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Press.
- . 2003. *City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Cochran, Clarke. 1977. "Authority and Community: The Contributions of Carl Friedrich, Yves Simon, and Michael Polanyi." *The American Political Review* 71, no. 2.
- Friedman, Richard. 1973. "On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy." In R. E. Flathman, editor, *Concepts of Social and Political Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1973. *Theory and Practice*. Translated by John Viertel. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1968. *Leviathan*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- John Paul II. 1995. *Evangelium Vitae* [Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life]. The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.
- Llosa, Mario Vargas. 2012. *Notes on the Death of Culture*. New York: Picador.
- Locke, John. 1997. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- . 2003. *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*. Edited by Ian Shapiro. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame.
- Nisbet, Robert. 1975. *Twilight of Authority*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Plato. 1975. *The Republic*. Translated by F. M. Cornford. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Polanyi, Michael. 1949. "Authority of the Free Society." *The Nineteenth Century and After* 146 (July): 347–360.
- . 1951. *Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1958/1962. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1965. "On the Modern Mind," *Encounter* (24:12-20) May.
- . *Knowing and Being*. 1974. Edited by Marjorie Greene. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- . 2016. “On Liberalism and Liberty,” in *Society, Economics, and Philosophy*. Ed. R.T. Allen. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1975. *Power: A New Social Analysis*. London: Unwin Paperbacks.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *The Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Weaver, Richard. 1948. *Ideas Have Consequences*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- West, Cornel. 1994. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Press.
- . 2004. *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. New York: Penguin Press.