
“The Deliberate Holding of Unproven Beliefs”: Judgment Post-Critically Considered

Hannah Arendt ends her volume *Thinking* with observations on the importance of gaining greater clarity about the “faculty” of judgment and determining how the *modus operandi* of this faculty differs from those of the faculties of thinking and willing. A proper understanding of judgment, she advises, is relevant to “a whole set of problems by which modern thought is haunted, especially to the problem of theory and practice and to all attempts to arrive at a halfway plausible theory of ethics.”¹ In her view, nothing less is at stake in a theory of judgment than the possibility of evaluating the movement of history (the outcome of a war, the rise of a party, the reign of a tyrant, the fall of a civilization) to be wrong even though successful. Only a proper theory of judgment can safeguard “the autonomy of the minds of men and their possible independence of things as they are or as they have come into being.”² Although Michael Polanyi understands judgment in a very different way (he would not agree that it is a disinterested faculty of mind detached from action), he is like Arendt in according it a central place in his treatment of knowing. Though he frames the stakes differently, he, too, holds that a proper understanding of judgment is of critical importance for the ethics and politics upon which our social well-being rests.

Judgment Construed Four Ways

Current understandings of the notion of judgment tend to be organized around several different centers of interest. Before we turn to Polanyi, it will be helpful to differentiate some of these contrasting, albeit interrelated, ways in which the variable signi-

fier “judgment” is used, not only in ordinary speech but also in the scholarly and professional disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and, sometimes, politics.

(1) *Judgment as a peculiar kind of proposition.* Where it is assumed that there is some significant, qualitative difference between “knowledge” and “belief” or “opinion,” and where “judgments” (particularly in moral or aesthetic matters) are taken to be closer to “beliefs/opinions” than to “knowledge,” discourse about judgment(s) tends to be discourse about whether and how such unproven deliverances can be justified. The tendency to equate judgment with taste arises in this context and amounts to an admission that judgments cannot be justified. Not everyone interested in the question of justification reduces judgment to indisputable but trivial tastes, but where that move is resisted, efforts have to be made to indicate how judgments can be adequately grounded and defended. In this latter case, judgments are construed as some form of communicated proposition, of which it is right and proper to ask, Is this judgment true or false? Why should I trust your judgments rather than those of someone else? By what warrant do you hold to be true what you cannot demonstrate or logically defend?

(2) *Judgment as a particular kind of decision.* In an area of inquiry that is equally mined by psychologists and philosophers, the notion of judgment also plays a role in efforts to think through the nature of decision in the practical domain where choices must be made among alternatives. Rationality is generally thought to adequately explain decisions where knowledge is complete. It is in dealing with situations in which there is some significant degree of latitude or uncertainty that theorists tend to invoke judgment to name an authoritative decision or verdict. The flexibility of judgment and its vulnerability to error or dispute arise precisely because it seems to involve a sort of mental leap by which we arrive at an assessment, resolution, or course of action when the available observations, facts, and explanations do not suffice to compel a particular decision.³

(3) *Judgment as a special kind of wisdom or even virtue.*

Describing the “inconstant character of Gallienus,” Edward Gibbon wrote, “In every art that he attempted his lively genius enabled him to succeed; and as his genius was destitute of judgment, he attempted every art except the important ones of war and government.”⁴ Judgment, or the want of judgment, is often invoked to name a quality of mind or character that is essential to success in practical affairs. In this usage, it is generally opposed to speculative knowledge, as a tool for getting at the discriminations that are made as agents chart their way among multiple possible courses of action in light of an objective. In some ways judgment in this sense is something akin to deftness in problem-solving and is linked to good sense or experienced discernment. While this is not entirely divorced from conceptions of judgment as a particular kind of decision, the emphasis falls differently. Here the interest is not centered on the limits of rationality in the face of uncertainty; the interest arises in relation to the agent’s capacity, however difficult it may be to specify, to pursue a path that is creative, successful, prudent, or wise—as determined in light of both the dynamics in play in the initial situation and the state of affairs that is successfully brought about. In this connection, Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* is often invoked. Good judgment is practical wisdom, as opposed to theoretical knowledge and rational cognition. This is the use of “judgment” that has made the construct appealing to political theorists like Isaiah Berlin. This is also the usage that anchors Leslie Paul Thiele’s rich and valuable recent volume *The Heart of Judgment*.⁵

(4) *Judgment as a fundamental power of persons.* There is a yet more basic or radical sense in which the signifier can be used. This is the sense in which the “faculty” of judgment comes very close to meaning a fundamental power either of the human mind or of human agency. Understood in this way, the activity of judging is considered to be constitutive of (though not exhaustive of) personhood rather than being represented as a contingent quality or performance that turns up in some lives but not in others. Although Arendt in some of her earlier works seems to have treated judgment along the lines of *phronesis*, by the time she

sketched the conception of judging that was to have been developed in the book that she did not live to write, she considered the “faculty” of judging to be one of the three fundamental faculties of “the life of the mind.” Because it “judges *particulars* without subsuming them under general rules which can be taught and learned,” it is the faculty “which one may call with some reason the most political of man’s mental abilities.”⁶ Immanuel Kant, she suggests, was the first philosopher to give any account of it. The American pragmatist Justus Buchler’s quirky but intriguing *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment* also offers an account of judgment that falls into this category.⁷ Unlike Arendt, who firmly lodges judgment in the *vita contemplativa* with no foothold in the *vita activa*, Buchler considers judgment to offer manifestations that correspond to speaking (assertive judgment), making (exhibitive judgment), and doing (active judgment). Michael Oakeshott, claiming the legacy of the idealist tradition and denying that there is any such thing as unmediated experience, treats experience and judgment as identical: “thought or judgment, as I see it, is not one form of experience, but is itself the concrete whole of experience.”⁸ By means of his refusal to separate what others regard as distinctively mental operations from active experience and intervention, he, too, brings action itself into the house of judgment.

Polanyi’s Account of Knowing as Judging

Polanyi is one of those theorists who construe judgment to be a fundamental power. His treatment of judgment as constitutive of personhood puts a foundation under discussions of practical judgment in morals and politics. It alters the landscape that gives rise to the notion that judgments are peculiar forms of propositions or suspect kinds of decisions; such treatments of judgment presuppose distinctions between knowledge and belief, certainty and guesswork, that Polanyi refuses to honor. His argument makes it much harder to regard the sorts of propositions and decisions in question as belonging to a distinct category rather than being ranged somewhere along a continuum with all other

defensible claims and choices. Out of his distinctive account of judgment, Polanyi also develops a distinctive account of validation. This brief consideration cannot hope to unfold the richness of Polanyi's analysis because his consideration of judgment is coextensive with his entire innovative account of "personal knowledge." What it can do is suggest some of the ways that Polanyi's treatment of the subject intersects with and can contribute to the various contemporary conversations in which judgment commands increasing attention.⁹

Developing a clear view of his contribution to these conversations requires some extrapolation from his work. He does not provide any definitive essay or chapter that explicitly situates his work in relation to this domain of inquiry. He does not even make heavy or frequent use of the terms "judgment" and "judging." The index of *Personal Knowledge*, the most complete and systematic statement of his "post-critical philosophy," offers only two entries for "judgment" and none for cognate terms.¹⁰ There are, however, revealing passages throughout his work that make it clear that he assimilates his conception of "personal" knowledge to the domain of judgment. In the 1952 essay "The Stability of Beliefs," he writes,

I hold that the propositions embodied in natural science are not derived by any definite rule from the data of experience, and that they can neither be verified nor falsified by experience according to any definite rule. Discovery, verification and falsification proceed according to certain maxims which cannot be precisely formulated and still less proved or disproved, and the application of which relies in every case on a personal judgment exercised (or accredited) by ourselves.¹¹

A similarly defining passage can be found in the concluding summary with which he ends *The Tacit Dimension*. Differentiating his account of the skillful and "responsible" problem-solving of exploration and discovery from both subjectivistic and objectivist accounts of knowing, he argues that the commitment of the knower to the "hidden reality" that she is seeking to grasp—and,

indeed, of which she has tacit intimations—anchors her and her findings firmly in a shared and knowable world, rather than casting her adrift in a subjective sea of whim and illusion. “Responsibility and truth,” Polanyi writes, “are in fact but two aspects of such a commitment: the act of judgment is its personal pole and the independent reality on which it bears is its external pole.”¹² The act (and art) of personal judgment is, in fact, the core of his distinctive conception of the nature of knowing as he develops it in interlocking texts over several decades, particularly in *Personal Knowledge* (1958), *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), the essays collected in *Knowing and Being* (1969),¹³ and his late work *Meaning* (1975), which was readied for publication with the assistance of Harry Prosch.¹⁴

The two passages in *Personal Knowledge* that are indexed under “judgment” are passages in which Polanyi also gives definition to what he calls the active centre or active principle that is nameable only through the list of its doings: that which desires, exercises skills, seeks contact with reality, probes, organizes, uses, attends, strives, discovers, assesses, knows that and knows how, and commits itself. Significantly, the first reference to judgment is embedded in a discussion not of thought but of perception. He affirms that there are persuasive “reasons for recognizing persons who use their senses as centres of intelligent judgment.”¹⁵ Far from considering perception to be a form of passive reception, he argues that it is “an activity which seeks to satisfy standards which it sets to itself.”¹⁶ Perception is one of the forms of “intellectual striving,” and like all intellectual striving, it has its origin in “an active principle” which just is the fact of “our innate sentience and alertness.”¹⁷ Perception itself exhibits the from-to character of all knowing as we dwell in often innumerable sensory clues to organize a comprehensive experience of meaning. “The process illustrates clearly the active principle which seeks to establish a coherence between all the clues of visual perception, so that our subsidiary awareness of them in terms of what we see shall satisfy us of having truly comprehended the things seen.”¹⁸ Once proficiency has been established in interpreting and shaping the

“clues” to the real that are provided by the bodily senses, perception usually “operates automatically,”¹⁹ but this in no way changes its fundamentally active and intentional character. One of his few quarrels with Gestalt psychologists is that, although they appreciate the from-to structure of knowing, their treatment of perception “leaves no place for any intentional effort which prompts our perception to explore and assess in the quest of knowledge the clues offered to our senses.”²⁰

The second indexed reference to judgment in *Personal Knowledge* occurs in Polanyi’s discussion of evolutionary achievement. Discussing the elusive period of the evolutionary awakening of consciousness, he disconcertingly employs the term “personhood” in relation to all sentient organisms, right down to worms and to the wormlike ancestors of the whole rich and varied animal kingdom. However primitive that wormlike ancestor may have been, a turning point was reached in evolutionary history when the coalescence of a major ganglion in the “forward” segment of the creature produced a “gradient . . . between the higher and lower functions within the organism.”²¹ Even before the formation of sensory organs, “within this active centre the animal’s personhood is intensified in relation to a subservient body.”²² With the later development of multiple senses, “the animal’s area of mental control” is extended into “its surrounding space.”²³ This new power of extension gives rise to an entirely new hazard: error. This is the point at which Polanyi locates the rise of judgment, together with the troubling experience of uncertainty from which escape is sought but never found:

But seeing is foreseeing and is hence also believing; perception involves judgment and the possibility of error. Therefore, as the personhood of our ancestors was enriched and expanded by the power of new senses, it was intensified still further in undertaking to control new hazards. The polarity of subject and object began to develop, and with it the fateful obligation to form expectations based on necessarily insufficient evidence.

The beginnings of such acts of judgment are shown in the

capacity to learn from experience. . . . A whole firmament of self-set standards was prefigured here and soon the first faint thrills of intellectual joy appeared in the emotional life of the animal. And it became also liable to puzzlement and frustration.²⁴

These passages make it strikingly clear that, for Polanyi, judgment is not restricted to high-level cognitive and reflective enterprises. It is, on the contrary, the most basic form of interpretive activity of which sentient life is capable. To say that acts of judgment rise on a continuum through the whole animal kingdom into the human domain does not, in Polanyi’s view, detract in any way from the power of such acts or from the importance that should be accorded them. “There is, indeed, complete continuity between a perceptive judgment and the process by which we establish responsible convictions in the course of scientific research.”²⁵ Judging is, of course, an activity that is massively transformed in the emergence of “responsible personhood,”²⁶ which necessarily occurred in tandem with the invention of language because language empowers articulate thought and thus gives rise to the capacity to create “a lasting articulate framework of thought.”²⁷ Human beings make judgments relying upon staggering constellations of tacit factors, and by our judgments we pass beyond registering reality to the creation and transformation of layers of reality, our social worlds, that emerge only through our activity.

Yet he also affirms that the act of judging is reflexively transformative—that is, it alters even the person carrying out the act. In *Personal Knowledge* he puts it this way:

to modify our idiom is to modify the frame of reference within which we shall henceforth interpret our experience; it is to modify ourselves. . . . it entails a conversion to new premises not accessible by any strict argument from those previously held. It is a decision, originating in our own personal judgment, to modify the premises of our judgment, and thus to modify our intellectual existence, so as to become more satisfying to ourselves.²⁸

In *Meaning* he puts the same point even more plainly. To learn or discover something not previously known is to modify one's judgments, and "we actually make existential changes in ourselves when we modify our judgments."²⁹ These claims rest on Polanyi's account of the unspecifiability or indeterminacy of all acts of knowing. Because this aspect of Polanyi epistemology throws his work athwart the suppositions that undergird the first and second uses of "judgment" that I identified above, it is worth examining this aspect of his argument.

In *Personal Knowledge*, at the end of chapter 8, "The Logic of Affirmation," Polanyi states that his purpose is "to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs."³⁰ He undertakes to do this by showing that even those "beliefs" or knowledge claims that appear to be most completely objective in the sense of being fully specifiable, as well as governed solely by public and explicit rules of procedure and criteria of assessment, are, in fact, heavily shaped by the commitments of the knowers and the expectations and convictions of the community in which the knowers operate. But in affirming and upholding "unproven beliefs," he in no way understands himself to be yielding to subjectivism. This project of developing a third way, an alternative to the seesaw between nihilism and the "scientific Minotaur,"³¹ is, of course, the axis of his philosophical contribution. All human knowing—whether it is the knowing of a scientist, an ethicist, an artist, or a legislator—is inescapably indeterminate by its very nature.

His first defense of this argument to indeterminacy rests on the structure of the skillful process of tacit integration by means of which that sentient, alert, "active centre" extends its reach outward on the basis of the full constellation of what it has already mastered. Our explicit claims and reasoning about whatever may be the object of our attention are achieved through reliance on a vast unspecified or indeterminate array of subsidiary particulars. Thus, even if we are able to specify all the features of the situation that are relevant to the subject of focal attention, there is an unplumbed and, indeed, unplumbable domain of the taken-for-

granted that not only remains unspecified but in large part *must* remain unspecified. How this reliance takes place is not a rule-bound procedure; it is an existential indwelling. Moreover, the tacit and subsidiary factors include not only present perceptions and past learnings but also all of the personal commitments that shape us as the inquirers who we are at that given moment. Some, but not all, of these subsidiary factors could be brought up to the level of explicit awareness and specifiability, but in doing that, we shift them from subsidiary particulars to the object of focal attention, changing them in the process. “[W]e find that they do not, in their new guise, logically imply—i.e., imply explicitly or in a detached manner—the reality that we find them to imply through an indwelling *tacit* inference.”³² Thus, Polanyi insists that the effort to render the tacit explicit does not enrich the specifiability of the feat of understanding; on the contrary, it “disorganizes” or “dismembers” the achievement because one cannot simultaneously attend to the parts and the whole.³³

Polanyi also holds that every act of commitment, discovery, or assent is necessarily indeterminate at the moment of its occurrence because such acts always involve some imaginative crossing of a logical gap between what is known and what is yet to be known. Whether this gap is “almost imperceptible” or “as large as any human mind can hope to overcome,” the passage across it is “essentially unformalizable.”³⁴

Our acts of knowing or discovery are, however, indeterminate in yet a third way. To learn or discover something not previously known is to modify the very judgments and commitments on which one relied in the act of discovery. This adds a complicating layer of indeterminacy because such existential changes cannot possibly be specified by the agent undergoing them and because the consequences of these changes can unfold only in relation to unforeseeable situations that the agent will encounter in the future. Polanyi thus affirms that there is a kind of fluid, dialectical interaction between the focal learning and the subsidiary domain of tacit skills and commitments. The process of moving from what has already been mastered to some new configuration of under-

standing involves some implicit change in the structure of those subsidiary particulars; in order to achieve such a feat, we must “literally dwell in different principles from the ones we have been at home in.”³⁵ He specifically says that this shift in the subsidiary reliances happens neither as a precondition of nor as a result of the new judgments. The two happen indistinguishably: “we modify our [tacit] grounds in making new [explicit] judgments.” As the new judgment solidifies from tentative to firm (not all do, of course—some of our judgments are held only fleetingly), we commit ourselves to it and by extension to the new subsidiary principles that made it possible (even though we cannot “know” in any explicit way what these new principles are). Because he holds that any new judgment thus involves some adjustment, whether large or small, in the structure of our commitments, he considers the knower to be existentially changed: “we thus change the character of our lives.”³⁶

Polanyi thus most certainly belongs among those thinkers who consider a judgment to be an indelible deliberative power constitutive of personhood. On his account, judging is a considerably more pervasive activity than Arendt recognizes. Rather than contrasting it against thinking and willing, he seems to integrate it into both. Or perhaps it would be better to say that this is another set of well-worn distinctions that he discards. In an unpublished paper comparing the treatments of judgment offered by Polanyi and Bernard Lonergan, Richard Moodey considers and rejects the proposal that Polanyi is properly described as a voluntarist and Lonergan as an intellectualist. On the contrary, he argues that the real difference between the two theorists is that for Lonergan the traditional “separation of the faculties of intellect and will, with their corresponding acts of judgment and decision” is important and useful whereas Polanyi simply ignores it. It ceases to be a meaningful distinction in Polanyi’s account of “‘active centers’ which have the capacity for discovery, creativity, and personal commitment.”³⁷

Blurring the distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* as Buchler and Oakeshott also do, Polanyi offers a

far more comprehensive analysis than that advanced by Buchler and one unburdened with the problems associated with Oakeshott’s treatment of experience as “a form of thought.”³⁸ If one reads Kant as Howard Caygill does, there may be an ironic companionship between Polanyi and this paradigmatic critical philosopher. In *Art of Judgement*, Caygill represents the unspecifiable agency at the center of Kant’s analyses as “judgment-power,” not abstract intellection. Being a power of action, it “cannot be stated apart from its system of judgments.”³⁹ It is, thus, “hidden,” “secret,” “concealed.” It judges itself and presupposes itself. It can only be tracked and uncovered through scrutiny of the “difficulties” that its operations leave. It is, Caygill says, quoting Kant, “an art concealed in the depths of the human soul.”⁴⁰ Determined though he is to discredit critical philosophy, Polanyi seems to have been aware of his Kantian kinship. In a letter written to Marjorie Grene at about the time of the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi asserts that “the real theme of the 3rd critique” is that “all comprehension is informal and personal.” Thus, Kant did, Polanyi says, properly describe the role of commitment in knowledge, but did so in the *Third Critique*, not, as most people think, in the first. What he wrote in the *Critique of Judgment* “leaves little of the First Critique standing.”⁴¹

Judgment as Practical Wisdom

Having examined Polanyi’s identification of judgment with our most basic sense-reading and sense-making powers, even with perception and motility, one can appreciate how this account of judgment also provides an interesting and distinctive resource for considering the phenomena that others have gathered under the names of *phronesis*, prudence, or practical wisdom.⁴² Judgment, as Polanyi understands it, certainly displays itself in abstract and conceptual inquiry, but as we have already seen, it is in no wise restricted to that. Thiele, in *The Heart of Judgment*, draws on Polanyi’s work to support his study of judgment as practical wisdom. His interest in Polanyi is confined to Polanyi’s account of the from-to structure of knowing, and while this misses the

deeper relevance of Polanyi to an understanding of practical wisdom, it is a good place to start.

Polanyi's differentiation of the explicit or focal objects of attention from the subsidiary particulars upon which the knower tacitly relies is quite different from the distinction between the conscious and unconscious mind. Efforts to correlate it with that familiar distinction will only lead to needless tangles and misunderstandings. It is not a theory about layers of mind at all; it is, rather, a theory about the way in which the organism organizes and utilizes its body, its established knowledge, and its environment as it seeks its goals. Accordingly, the notion that the person (or, actually, any sentient organism) is capable of "dwelling in" various particulars of the body or the natural, social, or conceptual environment without taking those particular features of the body or environment as the object of inquiry or focus of attention is the fundamental supposition of the tacit-explicit distinction. The knowing agent (whether that agent is a scientist, an artist, or a politician) is engaged in a complex, extended act of orchestration, which the agent may do comparatively well or comparatively badly.

Here, too, Polanyi upends the notion of subjective opinion. Since knowing is no longer locked up in the head but extended in innumerable ways into the body and environment, most of what people have objected to as "subjective" is thoroughly grounded in the knower's worldly relationships.⁴³ Conversely, Polanyi refuses the pernicious distinction between rational knowledge and "mere opinion" or "belief" that has been the legacy (still very much with us) of eighteenth-century epistemology. From his point of view, there is nothing peculiar or problematic about moral, political, and aesthetic "value judgments," since such judgments are not qualitatively different from the judgments made by scientists. He is, in fact, particularly well fitted to analyze such judgments in non-reductive and illuminating ways.

The value of Polanyi's account of judgment for an understanding of practical wisdom can be illustrated by examining his work in relation to Isaiah Berlin's well-known essay "Political Judgment." Berlin begins with these questions: "What is it to have

good judgement in politics? What is it to be politically wise, or gifted, to be a political genius, or even to be no more than politically competent, to know how to get things done?”⁴⁴ He takes as his adversaries those who purport to be developing a “proper, successful science of society” which they take to consist of systematized “laws of social development,” which in turn lay “the foundations of indubitable knowledge” that can be “taught, learned, applied . . . [as] a matter of professional competence and specialization.”⁴⁵ This he considers to be an entirely misbegotten project resting on a complete misunderstanding of how statesmen and successful political leaders actually operate. Against this Berlin argues passionately that the indispensable feature of political success is practical wisdom or practical reason—“a sense of what will ‘work,’ and what will not.”⁴⁶ It is a gift or a capacity that is correlated with neither speculative, theoretical knowledge nor moral virtue. He describes this capacity in several different ways, but for our purposes the most telling description is the following:

Bismarck (or Augustus) had the power of integrating or synthesizing the fleeting, broken, infinitely various wisps and fragments that make up life at any level, just as every human being, to some extent, must integrate them (if he is to survive at all), without stopping to analyze how he does what he does, and whether there is a theoretical justification for his activity. Everyone must do it, but Bismarck did it over a much larger field, against a wider horizon of possible courses of action, with far greater power—to a degree, in fact, which is quite correctly described as that of genius. Moreover, the bits and pieces which require to be integrated—that is, seen as fitting with other bits and pieces, and not compatible with yet others, in the way in which, in fact, they do fit and fail to fit in reality—these basic ingredients of life are in a sense too familiar, we are too much with them, they are too close to us, they form the texture of the semi-conscious and unconscious levels of our life, and for that reason they tend to resist tidy classification.⁴⁷

Berlin treats this power of political judgment, or practical wisdom, as something in its nature different from science. It remains a mysterious gift, an “instinct,” as inexplicable, improvisational, and unteachable as artistic genius. While he takes pains to differentiate it from some sort of “magical” intuition, in the end he cannot truly account for it. Polanyi can.

The unanalyzable integrations and syntheses that Berlin rightly praises are, for Polanyi, simply paradigm cases of what he believes to be the basic structure of all knowing and all judgment: the tacit integration of subsidiary particulars into a comprehensive grasp of complex situations. This grasp of the situation is not separable from a grasp of what the situation requires and invites. Whereas Berlin holds political judgment to be a special case that can and should be treated as different from scientific knowledge (which has its own proper, if limited, role to play), Polanyi holds that the nature and structure of political judgment is not, in fact, different from the nature and structure of scientific judgment—a position that he can hold only because he is convinced that the account of science given by Berlin and Berlin’s social science adversaries is simply wrong. But one could hardly imagine a more Polanyian analysis of the gifts of the statesman than that offered by Berlin; even the language is often the same. Polanyi would be as adamant as Berlin in arguing that the statesman’s “reading” of social and political situations can never be rendered explicit or improved by mastering rules of procedure, but he nevertheless believes that a proper understanding of the nature of these judgments provides a framework for conceiving how political judgment might be cultivated, for in the end it is no different from any other kind of judgment.

The Validity of Judgment

We are now in a position to return to the question of the validity of the judgments that we make. There are three things to be taken up here: (1) Polanyi’s notion of self-set standards, (2) his argument that, at the moment when the agent actively makes a judgment, there are no applicable standards save the standards

that the agent herself invokes, and (3) his analysis of the ways in which our judgments can go wrong.

Polanyi has extraordinary respect for the heuristic passion of the human knower. Embedded in the organism is an inestimably powerful urge, as he often puts it, to make contact with the real. I do not think people sufficiently appreciate the role of hope in Polanyi’s account of striving, judging, and knowing. There is a sense in which unquenchable hope is offered as the deepest human motivation. Our “intellectual life,” like all our pre-intellectual activity, is “sustained by the hope of coming by it into closer touch with reality.”⁴⁸ This urge, the struggle for noetic control, drives us to explore and to inquire, neither of which is possible apart from cascading sequences of judging actions. At the same time that it drives our reaching after true understanding and fruitful action, it is our only real protection against error. All of our achievements, from simple motility through complexities of perception to feats of intellection, “are guided by self-satisfaction.”⁴⁹ This heuristic urge, with its attending moments of both satisfaction and “discomfort,” protects us against error because, when it operates in undistorted ways, it is essentially self-correcting and self-extending. The “prevention of error” is always, then, curiously *ex poste facto*. We cannot stop our errors before we make them, but we can catch them and put them right—indeed, we are *driven* to identify and rectify them.

Self-set standards, then, are generated by the agent who pursues contact with reality, and they are a function of that very pursuit. It is in this sense that Polanyi argues that there is no standard by which the agent can be criticized at the moment when he judges or acts, because at that moment the personal “assent” he gives to his effort “is fully determined” by his own mental effort. “Since every factual assertion is conceivably mistaken, it is also conceivably corrigible, but a competent judgment cannot be improved by the person who is making it at the moment of making it, since he is already doing his best in making it.”⁵⁰

Yet he argues that these self-set standards are neither capricious nor subjective. In the first place, the judgments of the

knower are responsible to the reality that she is seeking to grasp. As Polanyi puts it in *The Tacit Dimension*, “what he [the scientist or any agent seeking understanding] pursues is not of his making; his acts stand under the judgment of the hidden reality he seeks to uncover.”⁵¹ From the formulation of the problem through the entire movement of investigation to the discovery in which it culminates, the process and the person pursuing it are subject to “an obligation to an external objective.”⁵² This produces a truly distinctive understanding of conscience in relation to knowing, and it would be difficult to imagine an account of mind more decisively removed from the picture of deracinate mental ideation at play with itself and only problematically related to any extra-mental beings. “In a competent mental act the agent does not do as he pleases but compels himself forcibly to act as he believes he must.”⁵³ This responsibility to the real, which Polanyi rolls into the very notion of mental competency, is incompatible with arbitrary fancies. Of course, judgments always capture the real only imperfectly, and the judgments of different agents (or even of the same agent over time) differ quite markedly. Some judgments are wrong in the sense of bearing on reality only very weakly. The fallibility of even our most prescient judgments arises in part because of the nature of reality: its overwhelming complexity (which places it beyond the power of any systemic human articulation), its elusiveness or “hiddenness,” and its evolving motility. But it is also owing to the nature of our knowing: “All our higher principles must rely for their working on a lower level of reality and this necessarily sets limits to their scope.”⁵⁴ There is, in Polanyi’s view, no escape from the hazards of judgment, no possibility of perfect understanding.

In the second place, the knower does not articulate these judgments for private pleasure; the knower articulates them with “universal intent.” At a minimum, this means that the knower announces his discovery to others with the intent that they, too, should embrace what he takes to be true. “We seek self-satisfaction here only as a token of what should be universally satisfying.”⁵⁵ This community operates *both* as a society with its own historically

established expectations and standards *and* as various individual agents who are formed in that community but are also capable of critically reforming the received wisdom. In the end, it is that community that will accept the novel affirmation or reject it.

Perhaps most important, the community of inquiry is already inscribed in the domain of tacit suppositions out of which the inquirer operates. An individual's self-set standards are (or should be), for the most part, derived from communities of experts who form the authority the agent recognizes and assimilates. The standards embraced by this community are self-set in that they are generated by human beings, not hard-wired and not somehow simply read off nature or revealed by supernatural agencies. They are human artifacts, just as language itself is a human artifact. At the level of the individual agent, standards are self-set in that they are not branded by force on the unwilling flesh of the rising generation. Every novice who submits to education, training, or any sort of communal shaping embarks on a process of willingly appropriating the skills of knowing that have been developed by prior generations.

Polanyi has such confidence in the heuristic passion of human beings and in our honest longing to grasp the real as it is and not as we might wish it to be that one is tempted to say that he is without a sense of sin. But Polanyi does not ignore or gloss over the difficulties that attend our efforts. As I have just indicated, he takes it for granted that much that we think and do will be in error. He makes no effort to conceal the risk and hazard of the human enterprise. Moreover, to the extent that *phronesis* and judgment are “talents” that are spread out along a continuum from the bumbler to the genius, the risks of error would seem to fall more heavily on some agents than on others. The built-in wisdom of the traditions of inquiry and even of our languages themselves diminishes this somewhat, but from this feature of the human enterprise there can be no escape. To wish for escape is to wish to be relieved of responsibility.⁵⁶

However, the knowing process can be corrupted, and Polanyi is thoroughly aware of this. His whole philosophical project has

its origins in his intention to uncover and set right contorted judgments that run so deep that they threaten to destroy a legacy of hard-won achievements in science, philosophy, the structuring of our common life, and the governance of nations. A full account would require at least another essay, although a few things can be mentioned here. Because tradition, communal practices, and expert authority function to limit the scope of error by placing the discoveries of all our forebears at our disposal, a deficient education (and I mean education broadly, not merely cognitive learning) sets agents up to make bad judgments. For the same reasons, the breakdown of “conviviality” represents a severe threat to the quality of judgments. Distorted notions of agency, judgment, and knowing can also sabotage the exercise of judgment, as Polanyi believes critical philosophy has sabotaged it. Agents can lose confidence in their powers of judgment and, lacking confidence or courage, operate less competently than they otherwise might. We may be induced, for example, to give focal attention to factors that should be operating tacitly, or we may become so consumed by doubt that the fiduciary structure of action and the passion of commitment are subverted, as they are in what Polanyi calls “moral inversion.”

Confidence, Cupidity, and Risk

His account of the corruption of judgment is actually broad and deep, but he does not ground it in deficiencies or perversities of the knower per se. One wonders whether his long residency in the citadel of the physical sciences might have left him with a more optimistic confidence in the human drive toward truth than could be sustained in the face of behavior in more various communities. John Kane gives us some sense of the distinctive (if not unique) nature of the scientific community in a sophisticated and helpful essay, “Integrity, Conscience, and Science,” that explores the question “whether the public can learn from science anything of ethical value.”⁵⁷ He rejects the romanticized conceptions of the virtuous scientist and the superiority of objective knowledge, as well as “the identification of science with human progress forged

in the Enlightenment.”⁵⁸ He acknowledges the erosion of trust in science resulting from (1) the dubious social effects of the applications and products of science and (2) growing public awareness of what he acknowledges to be the fairly widespread practice of scientific fraud and “parafraud.” Yet in his view, all of this thoroughly appropriate deflation of scientific hubris leaves untouched the fact that science *as an institution or organized set of practices* “has a rein on human cupidity through its institutionalization of skepticism and critique, which work constantly to prevent the closure of science as a system of knowledge.”⁵⁹ While scientists individually and in their daily work betray their own standards, pursue their own interests, and are blinded by ideologies (like everyone else), “in the end, however far away the end may be, the only thing that matters is a theory’s success in providing a convincing explanation of phenomena, one that accounts for the available evidence and can withstand the challenge of new evidence and argument and that thus may justify our belief in its descriptive truth.”⁶⁰ Moreover, he argues, although much that happens in the profession is driven extrascientifically by power and money, it is still true to say that “for many ordinary as well as for supremely gifted scientists, the chief reward is not power or money but ‘the chance of catching a glimpse of the transcendent beauty of nature.’”⁶¹ Thus, Kane suggests that the internal ethic of this profession and the integrity to which the profession as a whole is committed continue to offer lessons of ethical value to the wider public. Granting that anyone formed in Polanyi’s way of thinking would take exception to Kane’s treatment of skepticism as the bedrock of scientific inquiry, in all this Kane otherwise seems to me to be right. The question that it raises is whether Polanyi, who belonged among the most accomplished practitioners of this way of life, for that reason underestimated the force and reach of unbridled “human cupidity.”

Yet if one were able to call Polanyi back and convince him that he had misjudged the strength and stability of that urge to make contact with the real, had failed to appreciate its fragility and irresolution, such a concession would, from his vantage point,

change nothing. Polanyi has advanced a treatment of judgment that is quite radical and places him in opposition to most theorists, who conceive judgment in more circumscribed ways as one aspect of “the life of the mind” to be brokered by others of equal or superior stature and force and places him in opposition to most theorists, who conceive judgment in more circumscribed ways as one aspect of “the life of the mind” to be brokered by others of equal or superior stature and force. Which is the better approach would seem to be the most basic problem to be solved by the increasing number of theorists who consider “the question of judgment inherently interesting and of great significance to moral and political thought.”⁶² But once one holds, as Polanyi does, “the unproven belief” that judgment goes, as we might say, “all the way down,” then one is committed to the view that we have nothing to trust but ourselves and the “great articulate structures” that we have received from the generations before us—fallible, devious, idolatrous, ideological, and self-interested as we and they may be. He insists that although we may not want to be responsible (and may go to remarkable lengths to try to evade our responsibility), we *are* responsible. He trusts that however dimmed that longing for “contact with reality” may grow, it can no more be extinguished in us than in our animal kin, who live and die by their appraisals of where food and danger lie. Out of that longing will necessarily emerge the self-set standards by which individually and communally we true (imperfectly, yes, but as best we can) our discoveries and commitments. “We must,” he writes, “accredit our own judgment as the paramount arbiter of all our intellectual performances.”⁶³ We must do this recognizing that such self-accreditation, like the whole framework of tacit reliances, constitutes “an act of confidence, and all confidence can be conceivably misplaced.”⁶⁴

One thing is certain: Polanyi’s philosophy of judgment is not for the faint-hearted.

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NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, *Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 216.

2. *Ibid.*

3. See, for example, David Hardman and Laura Macchi, eds., *Thinking: Psychological Perspectives on Reasoning, Judgment and Decision Making* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2003). Part 2, “Judgment,” includes “Verbal Expressions of Uncertainty and Probability” by Karl Halvor Teigen and Wibecke Brun; “Possibilities and Probabilities” by Paolo Legrenzi, Vittorio Girotto, Maria Sonino Legrenzi and Philip N. Johnson-Laird; and “The *Partitive* Conditional Probability” by Laura Macchi. In this volume see especially the essay “Belief and Preference in Decision under Uncertainty,” by Craig R. Fox and Kelly E. See.

4. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with an introduction by Hugh Trevor-Roper, 6 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Everyman’s Library, 1993), 1:303.

5. Leslie Paul Thiele, *The Heart of Judgment: Practical Wisdom, Neuroscience, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6. Arendt, *Thinking*, 192.

7. Justus Buchler, *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1979). The work, under the same title, was originally published by Columbia University Press in 1951.

8. Michael Oakshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 27.

9. Other comparatively brief but valuable overviews can be found in Douglas Adams and Phil Mullins, “Conscience, Tacit Knowledge, and the Art of Judgment: Implications of Polanyi’s Thought for Moral Reflection,” *Soundings* 66, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 34–45; Yu Zhenhua, “Kant’s Notion of Judgment from the Perspective of the Theory of Tacit Knowing,” *Tradition & Discovery* 31, no. 1 (2004–5): 24–35; Gabriella Ujlaki, “The ‘Tacit’ and the ‘Personal’: An Aesthetical Approach to the Nature of Knowledge,” *Tradition & Discovery* 21, no. 2 (1994–1995): 8–10; and

Walter Van Herck, "The Role of Tacit Knowledge in Religion," *Tradition & Discovery* 26, no. 2 (1999–2000): 21–30.

10. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

11. Michael Polanyi, "The Stability of Beliefs," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 3, no. 11 (Nov. 1952): 218–19. The essay is also available on the Polanyi Society web site (<http://www.mwsc.edu/orgs/polanyi/essays.htm>).

12. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Anchor Books, 1966), 87.

13. Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

14. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). This book was developed primarily from three series of lectures that Polanyi delivered: one series in the spring of 1969 given at both the University of Texas and the University of Chicago, a second series in 1970 at the University of Chicago, and a third series in 1971 at the University of Texas. At Polanyi's invitation, Prosch assisted Polanyi in preparing materials from these lectures for publication. The general structure of the book is drawn from the 1969 lectures. In Prosch's own words, "Substantively . . . this is Michael Polanyi's work. These are his ideas, expressed for the greatest part in his own language. In the work I have done on his lectures I have not consciously altered any of the ideas he has expressed in his numerous published and unpublished works" (preface, x).

15. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 98

16. *Ibid.*, 96.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 97.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 98.

21. *Ibid.*, 388.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*,
25. *Ibid.*, 314.
26. *Ibid.*, 395.
27. *Ibid.*, 388.
28. *Ibid.*, 105–106.
29. Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, 62.
30. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 268.
31. *Ibid.*, 268.
32. Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, 61.
33. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 64.
34. *Ibid.*, 261.
35. Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, 62.
36. *Ibid.*, 62.
37. Richard W. Moodey, “Judgment in Polanyi’s Post-Critical Thought and Lonergan’s Critical Realism” (paper presented at the Conference on Polanyi’s Post–Critical Thought and the Rebirth of Meaning, Loyola University, Chicago, June 8–11, 2001).
38. Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 10.
39. Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgement* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 3. For a contrasting reading of Kant, see Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), chap. 5.
40. Caygill, *Art of Judgement*, 5, quoting Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.
41. Michael Polanyi to Marjorie Grene, October 13, 1959, Polanyi Papers, box 16, folder 1, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. Quoted in Ujlaki, “The ‘Tacit’ and the ‘Personal,’” 8. See also Polanyi, “The Unaccountable Element in Science,” *Knowing and Being*, 105–6.
42. For a discussion of *phronesis* in relation to Polanyi’s work, see Yu, “Kant’s Notion of Judgment,” 34, and Yu Zhenhua, “*Phronesis* in the Perspective of the Theory of Tacit Knowledge,” *Academic Monthly* 12 (2003).
43. Polanyi does not altogether discard the notion of subjectivity; indeed, retaining it seems to be instrumental to defining his conception of the personal. See, for example, *Personal Knowledge*,

300: “. . . we may distinguish between the personal in us, which actively enters into our commitments, and our subjective states, in which we merely endure our feelings. This distinction establishes the conception of the *personal*, which is neither subjective nor objective. In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action guided by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective.”

44. Isaiah Berlin, “Political Judgement,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy with an introduction by Patrick Gardiner (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 40. The text of this essay was developed from the script and recording of the sixth of Berlin’s seven talks on “Thinking about Politics,” first broadcast June 19, 1957, in the Third Programme of the BBC. This text was also published under the title “On Political Judgment” in *The New York Review of Books* 43.15 (October 3, 1996).

45. Berlin, “Political Judgement,” 42–43. Later in the essay he opposes himself to those who believe it is possible to develop a “natural science of politics” (49).

46. Berlin, “Political Judgement,” 47.

47. *Ibid.*, 47–48.

48. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 106.

49. *Ibid.*, 100.

50. *Ibid.*, 314.

51. Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*, 76–77.

52. *Ibid.*, 77. For a developed discussion of Polanyi’s understanding of conscience, see Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), chap. 2.

53. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 315.

54. Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*, 85.

55. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 106.

56. See *Personal Knowledge*, 268. Polanyi believes that the modern Western infatuation with “objective criteria of validity” springs from just this desire to shed the burden of responsibility.

Today he would no doubt see the same evasive impulse in the postmodern retreat into irony and self-interest.

57. John Kane, “Integrity, Conscience, and Science,” in *Integrity and Conscience*, Nomos 40, ed. Ian Shapiro and Robert Adams (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 118.

58. *Ibid.*, 117.

59. *Ibid.*, 123.

60. *Ibid.*, 124.

61. *Ibid.*, 134. He is quoting Freeman Dyson, “The Scientist as Rebel,” *New York Review of Books* (May 25, 1995), 33.

62. Thiele, *The Heart of Judgment*, vii.

63. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 265.

64. *Ibid.*, 250.