Michael Polanyi and the Problem of Toleration*

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Liberal Toleration

In the West the principle of toleration has been defended most vigorously by the various representatives of the liberal tradition. This liberal defense, in turn, has assumed at least two distinct forms – both of which, however, share a common commitment to empiricism, and thereby exhibit a certain uniform quality. Early liberalism, as represented in the writings of John Locke (1634-1704), based its political teachings on a theory of natural rights.[1] Later modern liberalism, such as that found in the work of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), abandoned the natural rights tradition in favor of a program of ethical and political utilitarianism. In spite of such developments, however, both forms of liberal thought were essentially empirical and thus contained a profound sense of metaphysical scepticism. As a consequence the liberal defense of toleration typically relied upon fundamentally critical assumptions. Perhaps this may best be illustrated by briefly examining the arguments of Locke and Mill respectively.

Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* was written in 1685 while he was in Holland during his flight from Stuart England. It was addressed to the Dutch theologian Phillipp van Limborch and printed anonymously in Latin and English four years later. Limborch had asked to record his thought concerning mutual toleration among Christians. In response, Locke argued on behalf of a policy of qualified religious liberty.

In demonstrating the principles of his tolerant society, Locke distinguished between two spheres of human activity. First, there was the temporal order. As such, it was organized as a political society and concerned with the pursuit of man's civil interests, i.e., life, liberty, and pursuit of property. The second sphere was that of the spiritual. It, in turn, was organized as a network of voluntary churches and, as such, was solely concerned with the salvation of the soul. Central to Locke's argument was

*The author wishes to express his gratitude to the Earhart Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities for grants which allowed him to study the materials of the Polanyi collection at the University of Chicago.

his assumption that these two realms were essentially autonomous and, thus, that each could function independently of the other. Given this separation then, Locke argued that the political authorities had no real interest in or legitimate authority over the religious beliefs of the various churches. Properly concerned only with the outward prosperity of its citizens, the state was thus compelled to respect the authority of each individual's personal conscience in those matters which were concerned solely with eternal salvation.

It is apparent that Locke's entire scheme presupposed the validity of his essential distinction between the temporal and the spiritual order. For Locke, the temporal order was the truly public realm. It was structured according to the principles of the natural law and these, in turn, were "as intelligible and plain to a rational Creature, and a Studier of that Law, as the positive Laws of Common-wealths, nay possibly plainer. . . ."[2] The sacred realm, on the other hand, was noticeably different. According to Locke, inasmuch as "the care of each man's salvation belongs only to himself,"[3] the sacred realm was essentially priviate in nature. Secondly, just as the public nature of the temporal realm was due in part to the "publicity" of the teachings of natural reason, so, too, was the private character of the spritual realm due, in part, to the private or individualized quality of religious belief.

Given his empiricist assumptions, Locke posited a rigid distinction between the workings of reason and the experiences of faith. Reason produced demonstrable knowledge; faith, on the other hand, was fundamentally a matter of trust. As such, the truths of science and those of revelation constituted two essentially separate categories of insight.[4] As Locke wrote in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding:*

> Reason, therefore, here, as contradistinguished to faith, I take to be the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths, which the mind arrives at by deduction made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties; viz. by sensations or reflections. Faith, on the other side, is the assent to any propositions, not thus made out by the deductions of reason; but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men, we call revelation.[5]

Given this dichotomy, reason appears incapable of judging the validity of various religious claims. Indeed, such matters actually appear to be beyond the scope of rational comprehension. Thus in his own time, Locke was surprised by the zeal with which churchmen tended to ". . .the establishment of opinion which for the most part are about nice and intricate matters that exceed the capacity of ordinary understandings."[6]

As the above arguments demonstrate, Locke's doctrine of religious toleration ultimately was based upon a metaphysical and religious scepticism. Given the fact that man can not rationally comprehend the nature of ultimate reality, a truly rationale society must allow for the variety of interpretive efforts which the condition of limited reason implies. Whereas the temporal order can be known and thus publicly accredited according to the methods of empiricism, the spiritual realm is illuminated only by the private insights of a radically personal Christian faith. As such, none of its "truths" could rightfully claim to structure the public order nor at the same time could any of them be excluded by the similar claim of

another.

It should be noted that Locke's defense of toleration was essentially a defense of religious toleration. This, in turn, is not surprising because the question of religious toleration was, indeed, one of the dominant political issues of his day. However by the 19th century the issue of toleration had expanded to include the larger question of intellectual and cultural dissent in general. As the principle of majority rule became firmly established, such liberal thinkers as John Stuart Mill began to worry about the possible development of what today is termed the "mass society." Thus, in 1859 John Stuart Mill published his *On Liberty*. In it he argued on behalf of the absolute freedom of thought and suggested that the state should not only tolerate dissent but at the same time actually encourage and foster it.

Like Locke, Mill based his arguments on a metaphysical scepticism. As an empiricist he rejected all efforts to argue on behalf of philosophical intuitionism. For Mill, all knowledge ultimately was based upon experience and, as such, the purpose of science was simply to establish the antecedent causes of each empirical event. Inasmuch as man was limited to a knowledge of material and efficient causation and could not, therefore, know formal or final causes, Mill defined reason in strictly instrumental terms. Thus, a fundamental ignorance about ultimate realities demanded, in turn, a policy of toleration. To have any other policy, according to Mill, would be to assume one's own infallibility.

Polanyi and the Critique of Critical Philosophy

Polanyi's critique of intellectural scepticism is well known and does not require a detailed account at this time. In general it is sufficient to say that his criticism may be divided into two categories: the consequential and the structural. In one set of arguments Polanyi criticizes the tradition of metaphysical scepticism primarily in terms of its cultural and historical consequences. Although at one time scepticism may have had the beneficial effect of checking the dogmatic tendencies within scholastic and medieval culture, today, according to Polanyi, its consequences are much more harmful. Specifically the sceptic's demand for clear and demonstrable truth has the effect of setting standards which no philosophy can meet. Given the fact that all knowledge either is tacit or contains a tacit component, no system of ideas can meet the expectations of scepticism. Consequently according to Polanyi, scepticism necessarily eventuates in a form of ethical nihilism and, therefore, undermines the very principle of toleration itself. He says,

> Let us apply this doctrine [scepticism] to ethical principles. It follows that, unless ethical principles can be demonstrated with certainty, we should refrain from imposing them and should tolerate their total denial. But, of course, ethical principles cannot, in a strict sense, be demonstrated: 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 and on equal terms. But a society in which unscrupulous propaganda, violence, and terror prevail offers no scope to tolerance. Here the inconsistency of a liberalism based on philosophic doubt becomes apparent: freedom of thought is destroyed by the extension of doubt to the field of traditional ideals, which include the basis for freedom of thought.[7]

In addition to criticizing the cultural and social consequences of

scepticism, Polanyi also offers a structural critique. That is to say, scepticism is an inadequate philosophy not only because of its effects upon a liberal society but also because of its inherent epistemological inadequacies. As Polanyi attempts to demonstrate in his critique of doubt, if one follows the logic of scepticism faithfully, he not only contradicts himself by *trusting* in the efficacy of doubt, but at the same time he eventually undermines the very conditions which make the acquisition of knowledge possible in the first place. Rigorously applied doubt results, for Polanyi, in the formation of a virgin mind, and a truly virgin mind, in turn, can only achieve a "state of imbecility."[8] Thus, for Polanyi scepticism is an unacceptable philosophy regardless of its social consequences. As an attempt to guide man in his search for truth, scepticism must fail because it is incapable of appreciating the logical structure of tacit knowing. And without such an appreciation no knowledge can be acquired.

Polanyi's critique of critical philosophy raises serious doubts as to the adequacy of the sceptical defense of toleration. However, if he is correct, does Polanyi, as a consequence, leave the policy of toleration without any defense whatsoever? Certainly given his own work, this could not have been Polanyi's original intention. Indeed his concern for intellectual liberty and social freedom is present throughout all of his writings. Yet in his discussions of freedom, Polanyi was always careful to distinguish between two types. The first type, "private freedom," is a form of liberty which is claimed as a personal right and, thus, its value is given independently of any specific social function which it might play. Typically, it is this form of freedom which has benefited from the arguments of the sceptics. As an appeal on behalf of autonomy, private freedom essentially seeks freedom *from* external controls. Polanyi not only rejects the sceptical defense of freedom, but he also fears that the doctrine of private freedom, with its emphasis upon the priority of the individual, can easily lead to a distorted sense of romanticism and perhaps ultimately even to a radical cultural nihilism.

Polanyi calls the second form of liberty "social freedom." Unlike "private freedom" which essentially serves one's own interests and desire, social freedom occurs when man is freed from his immediate concerns and desire so that he may submit to a higher spiritual reality with his own particular obligations. Inasmuch as "social freedom" liberates man from the lower so that he may obey the higher, it is essentially a freedom *for* responsible action. In describing this Polanyi writes:

> There is another meaning for freedom that is almost the exact opposite of the one we have been discussing. It regards "freedom" as "liberation" from personal ends by submission to impersonal obligations." When Martin Luther faced the Diet of Worms. . ., he was maintaining that his acknowledgement of a moral demand gave him a freedom from the pursuit of merely personal ends (such as the protection of his own life) as well as, in this case, a freedom from having to obey the authorities in religious matters. This is, of course, a form of liberation, although it is quite different from the self-assertive, individualistic one of the Utilitarians. . . .[9]

Thus, it is clear that Polanyi's critique of the sceptical defense of toleration is not meant to be a critique of toleration *per se*. In addition his efforts to describe the institutional mechanisms by which social freedom can be secured are well known. Drawing upon his analysis of the scientific

community, Polanyi favored a decentralized society wherein independent agents operated from dispersed centers while being subject to the observation and judgment of their colleagues.

At this point, however, an important question still remains. Polanyi's suggestion of an institutional framework for freedom does in itself represent a principled argument on behalf of toleration. In short, why should we be tolerant? What are the reasons that require toleration? And, at the same time, what are the limits, if any, that these reasons imply?

This issue may, perhaps, best be approached by adopting a distinction which Alasdair McIntyre made while discussing the issue of toleration in the work of Herbert Marcuse:

> The telos of tolerance is not truth but rationality. Certainly we value rationality because it is by rational methods that we discover truth; but a man may be rational who holds many false beliefs, and a man may have true beliefs and yet be irrational. What is crucial is that the former has the possibility of progressing towards truth, while the second not only has no grounds for asserting what he believes, even though it is true, but is continually liable to acquire false beliefs.[10]

It seems to me that MacIntyre's distinction between tolerance for the sake of truth and tolerance for the sake of rationality relates very nicely to the work of Polanyi. As I read him, Polanyi is primarily concerned with understanding the conditions of truth-seeking and not, with objective truth statements. Given his understanding of the subsidiary-focal relationship and given his insistance upon the open-endedness of all boundary conditions, it would appear that for Polanyi full and final truth is not possible. Consequently, it is truth-seeking (rationality) and not truth *per se* which must be the goal and intention of all human thought.

If this argument is correct, it would appear that toleration would only be justified if it could be shown that the very commitment to rationality itself requires the practice of toleration. Is this the case in Polanyi's system? The answer to this question is somewhat complex. At one level the commitment to rationality requires that one accept the actual procedures by which the reasoning mind operates. If truth-seeking is the goal, then one must allow for the actual ways in which the human mind does, in fact, seek truth. Indeed, the point is one of the real strengths of Polanyi's epistemology. Rather than attempting to force the mind to operate according to a preconceived set of methodological requirements, Polanyi attempts to "discover" his requirements in the concrete operation of the mind itself. Whether he is judged successful or not depends upon whether one is persuaded by the arguments of his *Personal Knowledge*. But from within his perspective, at least, it is fair to argue that for Polanyi rationality requires a commitment to the epistemology of personal knowledge. This epistemology, in turn, is characterized by its nonmethodological, highly personal, and intuitive qualities. Thus, for Polanyi it would appear that one of the conditions of rationality is a radical methodological openness and that such an openness, in turn, implies the acceptance of toleration. If toleration is only justified by its service to rationality, then, it is, indeed, justified by the requirements of reason as Polanyi understands them.

At this point, however, the argument is only half complete, for Polanyi's system contains both an epistemology and an ontology. As we have seen, his epistemology requires a radical openness; but as his ontology makes

clear this openness is necessarily an openness towards a higher level of reality itself. For Polanyi reality is multi-leveled or "stratified." As such the universe is understood to contain several distinct fields of comprehensive ordering which rely upon, but yet cannot be reduced to, one another. In view of this Polanyi has developed a decidedly metaphysical view of reality. For him reality is more than the sum of its immanent fact-objects. On the contrary, it is a hierarchical whole wherein the particulars of the world find their eventual meaning in an order whose source transcends the world as such. Referring to this metaphysical vision Polanyi writes:

> For, as many astute thinkers from Socrates on have seen, the world cannot be thought of as *ultimately* meaningful unless the organization of its parts is meaningful, that is, unless there is some point to the way things are put together or, at least, to the direction in which they are developing. This would mean that we would have to attain a view of the world in which the universe, per se, is not "value-free." Some intelligible directional lines must be thought to be operative in it.[11]

As Polanyi's discussion of the concept of marginal control makes clear, such a principle of organization can never be explained in terms of those specific laws which govern the operation of particulars. Thus, if there is a meaningful order in the world, the source of such an order must transcend that which is being ordered.

At this point it is necessary to investigate the relationship between Polanyi's epistemology and his ontology somewhat more carefully. Specifically, can one accept Polanyi's epistemology without at the same time commiting himself to a transcendental ontology? As I read Polanyi, one cannot. Inasmuch as the subsidiary-focal structure of knowledge suggests that one is aware of particulars only in terms of their contribution to that reality which they jointly *constitute*, the subsidiary-focal relationship appears to require the acceptance of a stratified universe. If all of reality were truly one dimensional (as in Hobbes), then the conjoining of particulars into a newly constituted reality would be an act of imagination rather than one of discovery. Yet since Polanyi insists upon both the validity of scientific discovery and its universal intent, it is necessary for him to insist that the structure of knowing is, in fact, similar to the structure of being itself. In short, for Polanyi knowledge and reality are intimately related by their possession of a common logical structure.

If correct, this argument has profound implications for the problem of toleration in Polanyi's thinking. Earlier it was suggested that toleration could be justified in terms of its contribution to the conditions of rationality. For Polanyi, however, there now appear to be two such conditions; one is epistemological and the other is ontological. First, rationality requires that one accept those procedures by which reason actually operates. And given Polanyi's understanding of those procedures, toleration is an obvious value. At the same time, however, an acceptance of the subsidiary-focal structure of comprehension seems to require that one also accept a certain metaphysical or transcendental ontology. As a result, this second condition for rationality seems to demand the acceptance of a particular ontological viewpoint and, thus, by necessity it establishes certain limits to the practice of toleration itself. Specifically from within Polanyi's system it does not appear permissable to tolerate a purely immanent world-view. If toleration can only be justified by its

contribution to rationality, and if a transcendental world-view is a necessary condition of truth-seeking, then to tolerate the destruction of a transcendental ontology is to tolerate the destruction of that very condition which makes toleration both possible and desirable in the first case.

According to Polanyi, then, there is only one alternative to the sceptical defense of toleration. It is a defense which is based upon an acceptance of the transcendental reality of intellectual and moral principles. As such, it is a defense built upon positive beliefs and thus one which is necessarily intolerant of those efforts which would seek to undermine its own necessary conditions. Polanyi writes:

> We can see, therefore, that a free society is not simply an "open" one, a society in which anything goes. It is a society in which men, being engaged in various activities whose ends are considered worthy of respect, are allowed the freedom to pursue these ends. A free society is therefore one whose citizens in the main are committed to – dedicated to – various ideals ends (such as truth) and therefore one that is able to respect the free activities of its citizens in pursuit of such ends. It cannot be a free society by being open on matters such as these, that is, by being neutral with respect to truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, honesty and fraud.[12]

Conclusion

The fact that Polanyi's defense of toleration was limited is not surprising. Indeed, even the sceptical liberals presupposed specific conditions which limited the applicability of their arguments. For example, John Locke specifically excluded both Roman Catholics and atheists from his policy of toleration. Thus, for Locke toleration seemed to be possible only within a functioning Protestant civilization. Similarly, John Stuart Mills' principles of liberty were recommended only for those societies whose members had received a sufficient education so that they could be further improved by rational, i.e. positivist, discussion. Toleration for Mill, therefore, was in fact limited to the progressivist and secularized societies of 19th century Europe.

What is particularly striking about Polanyi's argument, however, is his attempt to relate both the grounds for and limits of toleration to a specific ontological perspective. In this respect he is most similar to Plato, and a comparison of their ideas may help to illustrate both the strengths and dangers of this approach.

Although Polanyi would not wish to be identified as simply a disciple of Plato, their work is similar to the extent that each bases both his epistemology and ontology on a specifically transcendent world-view. In addition, the overriding purpose of each is to promote a particular form of human nature, which for the moment may be termed the "open soul." For both Plato and Polanyi, philosophy is not the dispassionate search for objective knowledge. It is rather a way of life or form of existence. Plato sought to convert men into "lovers of wisdom" whose very soul would reflect that transcendent order toward which they were drawn. Similarly, Polanyi, with his analysis of commitment and indwelling, emphasized the relationship between the form of one's personality and his potential for the acquiring of knowledge. For him the man of reason is more than simply a collector of information. He is, rather, one who responds to a particular

calling[13] and, thus, is characterized by his existential openness towards reality itself.[14]

In his *Republic* Plato attempted to specify those cultural, social, and political conditions which would aid in eliciting and sustaining philosophical existence. As such, he sought to make men lovers of wisdom (philosophers) rather than lovers of opinion *(philodoxers)*. To do so he was willing to tolerate those practices which were necessary for accomplishing such a task. For example, he would even permit the telling of "noble lies" if doing so would, in fact, serve the truth of the soul. And at the same time he would tolerate the radical challenging of received opinions inasmuch as such questioning was at the very heart of the philosopher's dialectical method. Indeed, one of the dangers of philosophizing, according to Plato, is that through its constant questioning of belief and dogma, it may, in fact, produce a certain nihilistic lawlessness among its practioners. Such a danger, however, had to be accepted for the sake of the pursuit of truth.

My emphasis on Plato's tolerance may appear somewhat unusual inasmuch as the more common interpretation of the *Republic* typically focuses upon its policy of censorship. Yet if one looks more closely at what is being censored, an interesting point emerges. For example, Plato censors some of the poets, including Homer. However, he censors them specifically because they claim to be all-knowing[15] and it is this claim which dampens man's awareness of his need to search for truth. In short, unless a man is aware of his ignorance, he will not undertake the search for knowledge. Instead, he will close himself around that which he believes rather than open himself to that which he does not yet grasp. Similarly in his *Republic* Plato both develops and censors the character of the tyrant. In doing so the tyrant is described as the lover of order who exists in rebellion against the possibilities of freedom. On the other hand, the philosopher, as his opposite, is the truly open soul whose constant questioning and probing represent a standing threat to all order as such. Thus, it seems fair to argue that Plato both tolerates that which promotes philosophical being and forbids that which prevents it. Philosophical being, in turn, is understood not in dogmatic but rather in existential terms. The philosopher is the one who is radically open unto transcendence.

Although Polanyi would no doubt disagree with some of the tactics which Plato suggested, I believe that his policy of toleration is in principle equivalent to that of Plato. Accordingly, toleration is ultimately justified in terms of its contribution to existential openness. In those cases where man's openness is threatened by such doctrines as nihilism or a one-leveled ontology, authority may be used to sustain the necessary alternatives. Indeed, on several occasions Polanyi has written of his willingness to enforce a commitment to those transcendent principles which are constitutive of the normative framework presupposed by a free society. As a policy designed to promote existential openness, toleration would in principle, therefore, resist all attempts at dogmatic closure.

The above comparison of Polanyi with Plato is intended, in part, to illustrate a potential danger for all systems of positive, as opposed to sceptical, toleration. Inasmuch as toleration is designed to promote a certain existential attitude toward transcendence, its justification is

embodied in the living presence of the open soul. However, this accomplishment can be communicated to others only by creating symbols which elucidate the experience of reason in its quest for truth. Thus just as the scientific community creates traditions and presuppositions which enable the novice to indwell in the intuitive insight of the expert, so, too, must the open-soul attempt to communicate its experience to those who have not yet shared it. Accordingly whereas for Plato the philosopher must speak to the *philodoxer,* so too for Polanyi, must the skilled master learn to communicate with the unskilled apprentice. As mentioned earlier this is typically done through the creation of a symbolic system or tradition and indeed, herein, lies a potential danger for toleration as such. According to Polanyi traditions are necessary so that through their creative appropriation the initiate may directly experience the focal vision which they make possible. Yet at the same time a proper concern for tradition can easily degenerate into a crude sense of traditionalism wherein the traditions, themselves, are treated as ends rather than as means. In these cases then loyalty to the letter of the tradition replaces the search for truth. In a like manner, Plato repeatedly refused to define the Good, which is the object of all philosophy, because he feared that such a definition could easily become absolutized. In such a case when the symbol is confused for the substance of philosophy, existential openness is quickly replaced by orthodox closure. Indeed, one can even argue that such a transformation even occurred in Plato himself when he replaced the philosopher-king of the *Republic* with the Nocturnal Council of the *Laws.*

This tendency to transform philosophy into dogma or living traditions into static systems is a danger which appears to be inherent in all forms of symbolization. It is especially dangerous, however, for those who advocate a policy of positive toleration. For wherever such a transformation occurs, the promotion of existential openness and the resistance to existential closure are soon replaced by a demand for loyalty to a particular creed and an intolerance of all who dare to challenge its literal meaning. In such cases, existential closure eventually replaces transcendental openness, yet it appears as such only to those who are already open and thus capable of distinguishing between the symbol and its engendering experience. Thus like Plato, Polanyi has developed a doctrine which necessarily presupposes the very quality it is attempting to elicit. Such systems appear to be inherently unstable, and the fate of Platonism should stand as a powerful warning to all who argue along similar lines.

ENDNOTES

[1]The natural rights perspective should not be confused with the older tradition of natural law. The natural law tradition argued that there is an objective hierarchy of values which exists by nature and according to which man is to attune himself. The natural rights tradition, on the other hand, begins from an absolutely justified subjective claim which is itself the source of all law and duty. Thus, for example, in the natural law tradiiton man is obligated to achieve certain ends whereas in the natural rights tradition he is entitled to receive certain benefits.

[2]John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government,* ed. Peter Laslett (New York: New American Library, 1965), p. 315.

[3]John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1955), p. 46.

[4]One qualification must be made. In his *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) Locke did argue that three essential dogmas of Christianity could be affirmed by natural reason: God exists; Christ was the messiah; and man should repent in order to live a righteous life. It is difficult to reconcile this teaching with the empiricism of Locke's *Essay* and I am not aware that he ever attempted to do so.

[5]John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Works* (rpt. Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1963; London: Thomas Tegg, 1823), III, 138.

[6]Locke, *A Letter*, p. 15.

[7]Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 9-10.

[8]Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Criticial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 295.

[9]Polanyi, *Meaning*, p. 201.

[10]Alasdair MacIntyre, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and Polemic* (New York: Viking, 1970), pp. 103-104.

[11]Polanyi, *Meaning*, p. 161.

[12]Polanyi, *Meaning*, pp. 196-97.

[13]Cf. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 393-405.

[14]Cf. Polanyi, *Meaning*, p. 181.

[15]Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 598a-99c.