

# QUAESTIONES DISPUTATAE

MICHAEL POLANYI'S  
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY  
AND THE FUTURE OF LIBERALISM

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## Michael Polanyi's Social and Political Philosophy and the Future of Liberalism

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# The Growth of Thought in Society as a Major Motif in Polanyi's Philosophy

*Phil Mullins*

Michael Polanyi claims that ideas are one of the most important components of human society and that promoting the growth of thought in society is a vital matter. Emphasis upon the growth of thought in society is a theme that Polanyi develops early in his writings before his Gifford Lectures (1951-1952), but it is also a theme running through Polanyi's philosophical perspective from early until late. Promoting the growth of thought is in some ways a common Enlightenment value, although Polanyi is in many ways also a sharp critic of other Enlightenment values. The importance of ideas and the growth of ideas are motifs that help unify Polanyi's diverse philosophical writing. One would expect to see them in his writings on science and epistemology, however, these motifs are also important in the social and political dimensions of Polanyi's perspective. In the historically-oriented discussion that follows, I will trace the notion of the growth of thought through a number of Polanyi's major publications. I will comment on Polanyi's philosophical development and lift up the importance of ideas and the growth of thought, early and late, and their bearing on social life. Since Polanyi may be an unfamiliar figure for readers of this journal, I begin with a brief overview of Polanyi's life and thought.

## 1. A Brief Account of Polanyi's Life and Thought

Michael Polanyi was born in 1891, the second youngest child in a prosperous secular Jewish Budapest family of six; his broad early education was provided by tutors and then an outstanding local school, after his engineer father's bankruptcy and death brought a decline in his family's

resources.<sup>1</sup> In 1908, Polanyi began the study of medicine at the University of Budapest but before he completed his program began work in physical chemistry and, in three short stints before the outbreak of World War I, studied this subject at the prestigious Technische Hochschule in Karlsruhe, Germany. An early chemistry research paper was sent by a professor to Einstein, who praised it, and it was quickly published. In later reflecting on this experience, Polanyi humorously commented: “Bang, I was created a scientist.”<sup>2</sup>

Polanyi was a physician in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I. But he was hospitalized during part of the war and he had light duty at other times, and was able to pursue chemistry research projects, and to publish a few papers. One of these he eventually turned into a Ph.D. thesis in chemistry and his degree was awarded after the war in July 1919. Polanyi was very briefly an official in the Hungarian Ministry of Health, but after the fall of the postwar Liberal government, he fled Hungary in late 1919 before the Red Terror, and returned to Karlsruhe and work in physical chemistry. His brilliant early research soon led to a position at one of the best German scientific research facilities, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes near Berlin, where he prospered as a bright young researcher who interacted with some of Europe’s best scientists. Polanyi’s later philosophical ideas about science were shaped by these years in Berlin,<sup>3</sup> and here also began his inquiries about economics, politics, and, more generally, social order, science and the problems of modern culture. But even as a natural scientist doing research Polanyi was a figure who worked in several different areas of chemistry. Michael Polanyi nurtured broad interests and made a career of crossing disciplinary borders.

Polanyi took a position at the University of Manchester in 1933 as the Third Reich came to power and the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes collapsed. He continued doing chemistry research for fifteen years but his interests and scholarly work outside the natural sciences expanded, and, in

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<sup>1</sup> For details on historical matters very briefly sketched in this section, see the Polanyi biography, William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), as well as Mary Jo Nye, *Michael Polanyi and His Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), and the Royal Society biographical memoir, E. P. Wigner, E. P. and R. A. Hodgkin, “Michael Polanyi 1891-1976,” *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society* 23 (1977): 413-448.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Polanyi, “Polanyi, Michael, (March 11, 1891-),” *World Authors, 1950-1970: A Companion Volume to Twentieth Century Authors* (New York: Wilson, 1975): 1151.

<sup>3</sup> Nye, *Michael Polanyi and His Generation*, 85-112.

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1947, he was invited to give the Gifford Lectures. He exchanged his chair in chemistry for one in social studies the next year in order to prepare for his upcoming Gifford Lectures and to pursue topics in social sciences, philosophy, and cultural studies.

Clearly, Polanyi was deeply troubled by the changed world that World War I brought, and his writing in the thirties and forties reflects his struggle to understand where modern culture and politics, deeply influenced by science, had gone wrong. The early steps toward a post-chemistry career came in the thirties and early forties when he produced an economics education film<sup>4</sup> as well as many lectures, articles, and a few books (plus many abandoned book projects) that treated politics, economics and particularly questions about the relation of science and society.

Especially after Polanyi moved to a chair in social studies, he was very active as a public intellectual, scholar and lecturer in the United Kingdom and the United States. By the middle of the last century, Polanyi expanded his earlier interests in economics and liberal political ideas to broader philosophical questions about human knowing and scientific knowledge, the evolution of modern ideas and the role of science in shaping modernity. Although sometimes he is identified as a “philosopher of science” or an “epistemologist,” Polanyi was never a guild member and he articulated sharp criticisms of the modern philosophical tradition, focusing particularly on what he regarded as the obsession with objectivity; he attacked impersonal accounts of science that ignored the centrality of discovery. More generally, Polanyi criticized the narrowness of modern understandings of knowledge that overlooked the social and personal roots of knowing. Descartes represents the modern turn in philosophical thinking, but Polanyi was steadfastly anti-Cartesian in his orientation. As suggested above, he wove with his sharp criticisms of modern ideas his alternative constructive account that he came to call his “post-critical” philosophy (see discussion below) which reconceived the nature of knowledge and the activity of human knowing, showing the importance of tacit elements.

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<sup>4</sup> Although significant recent Polanyi scholarship has focused on Polanyi’s film and its importance, I omit discussion of the film here. A 1940 version of the film is available at <http://www.polanyisociety.org/essays.htm> as well as links to many interesting documents and working papers on the film provided by Eduardo Beira. See also Phil Mullins and Gábor Bíró, “Interview with Gábor István Bíró,” *Tradition and Discovery* 45, no. 1 (February, 2019): 55-61, concerning Bíró’s recent dissertation on the film, and also Gábor István Bíró, *The Economic Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Routledge, 2020): 36-104.

In his 1951 and 1952 Gifford Lectures, two series of ten lectures each, collectively titled “Commitment, In Quest of a Post-Critical Philosophy,”<sup>5</sup> Polanyi begins to work out more fully his constructive philosophical perspective focusing on personal knowing. From these lectures, he produced, six years later, his magnum opus, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy*.<sup>6</sup> In the sixties and early seventies, in many articles, public lectures and several shorter books, Polanyi refined his ideas about science and society and about human knowing and the challenge of being human in the context of the unfolding cosmos.

## 2. Making Sense of Early Soviet History, Economics, and Science Policy

Polanyi’s interest in ideas and the growth of thought were never limited to the domain of science, although clearly Polanyi’s philosophical views emerge in the historical context of European discussions of the thirties and forties concerned with the nature of scientific ideas, the purposes of scientific work and how best to nurture it.

Polanyi struggled to make sense of the tumultuous economic, political, and cultural environment of post-World War I Europe that he experienced firsthand. He made the first of several scientific trips to the Soviet Union in 1928; he studied the politics and economy of Russia before and after the revolution and, in 1935, published “USSR Economics—Fundamental Data, System and Spirit,” an early statistical study of the Soviet economy that raised many questions.<sup>7</sup> Polanyi also became sharply critical of what he regarded as the uncritical admiration in the West for changes made in the Soviet Union and particularly the enthusiasm for Soviet science. His own ideas about science and science policy are thus forged as his criticisms of early Soviet history and science policy were worked out.

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<sup>5</sup> A version of Michael Polanyi’s Series I and II Gifford Lectures are available on the Polanyi Society website (<http://www.polanyisociety.org/Giffords/Giffords-web-page9-20-16.htm>).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). The 1964 Harper Torchbook Edition (New York: Harper and Row), which contains the important Torchbook Preface, is cited hereafter with the abbreviation PK.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Polanyi, “USSR Economics—Fundamental Data, System,” *The Manchester School of Economics and Social Studies* 16 (1935): 67-89. The article was reprinted separately as *U.S.S.R Economics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1936).

Polanyi's statistical study of the Soviet economy was republished in 1940 as part of his collection of essays on topics in social and political philosophy titled, *The Contempt of Freedom: The Russian Experiment and After*.<sup>8</sup> In his Preface, Polanyi contends that between 1935 and 1940 "the ideas of liberty ... were left almost uncultivated" because of widespread fascination with the revolution in Russia.<sup>9</sup> One of the essays in the volume explains the book's title: in the West, under the illusion of protecting freedom, economic ideas had been fostering something quite different. The "doctrine of *laissez faire*, has been most effective in bringing contempt on the name of freedom." The "name of freedom" has come to be deprived "of all public conscience" and this has precipitated a new public illusion that has "supported the claim of Collectivism to be the sole guardian of social interests."<sup>10</sup> Polanyi declared that progress has "become antagonistic to liberty" but liberty must once again become "a progressive idea" and "a conquering faith."<sup>11</sup>

In 1945, Polanyi published *Full Employment and Free Trade*, which is a primer on Keynesian ideas on manipulating the money supply.<sup>12</sup> This book apparently grew out of his earlier largely unsuccessful effort to promote wide scale use of his diagrammatic economics education film that also focused on discussion of regulating the money supply. Polanyi had great hope that economics education using new film technology could transform society in the thirties and forties. He was involved in conversations with economists both before he left Berlin and after he came to Manchester. He carefully studied Keynes (and no doubt other economics literature) and attempted to get Keynes to promote his economics education film. But Polanyi's interest in economics was inseparably bound up with historical events in the Soviet Union and particularly his interest in Soviet science policies and the persecution of Soviet geneticists. He focused his energy on criticizing Marxist influenced British policy discussions that emphasized "planning" and centralizing scientific research. Polanyi was an intellectual who throughout his life attempted to clarify large questions about the best way to organize the social order and that included but

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Contempt of Freedom: The Russian Experiment and After* (London: Watts & Co, 1940; New York: Arno Press [reprint], 1975). This early Polanyi book is hereafter cited with the abbreviation CF.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, v-vi.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Full Employment and Free Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945).

was not limited to science. Although he is certainly not a utopian (and was in fact sharply critical of utopian ideas both on the left and right), Polanyi's writing, early and late, often attempted to focus attention on how policy might shape the good society.

In 1935, Polanyi talked with the Soviet theoretician Bukharin, a watershed conversation that he later refers to several times. For Bukharin and Marxism, as Polanyi put it in 1939, "a distinction between *pure science*, which seeks to find truth for its own sake, and the *application of science* to practical purposes is not admitted because all intellectual processes are assumed to be equally determined by the modes of production of the material means of life."<sup>13</sup> Polanyi rejected this Marxist denial of the importance of pure science and his alternative constructive liberal view of science and society emphasizing the growth of thought grows out of these roots.

### 3. Science as an Organism of Ideas and Society as a Network of Dynamic Orders

By the late thirties, Polanyi began to articulate his view of science as a counter narrative to Marxist ideas, and he clearly identifies science as an "organism of ideas" and scientific research is the vehicle that stimulates "growth of the organism [which] cannot be deflected from its internal necessities by the prospects of useful applications."<sup>14</sup> It is thus an organic metaphor or framework that Polanyi developed as a counter to what he took to be the more mechanistic, deterministic, objectivist, and historicist account of Marxism that undervalued ideas and focused on material underpinnings of history and on inevitable class conflict. Clearly Polanyi's interest in the "growth of thought" was broader than his concern with how best to stimulate scientific progress.

In 1941, Polanyi published in *Economica* "The Growth of Thought in Society."<sup>15</sup> This essay's title points straightforwardly at Polanyi's broad emphasis upon "thought" and its growth as of primary importance in modern society. What Polanyi means by "thought" certainly included scientific knowledge, but it also included a broad range of cultural and even economic knowledge

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<sup>13</sup> Polanyi, CF, 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Polanyi, "The Growth of Thought in Society," *Economica* 8 (1941): 428-456. The title of this important early essay is hereafter abbreviated as GT. Citations also are foreshortened to GT.



that informs life in society. GT was a review article responding to J. G. Crowther's new book, *The Social Relations of Science*, but it is, nevertheless, Polanyi's most important early theoretical article articulating his larger vision of society and the intimate connection between human social life and the preservation and cultivation of human knowledge. Indeed, in GT, Polanyi broadly describes his review article's general purpose as analyzing the "part played in society by the ideal of Science and by the ideals of other aspects of truth."<sup>16</sup>

Crowther, a Manchester science journalist whom Polanyi had met while still in Berlin, was a writer promoting Soviet science and economics and a Marxist account of the history of science.<sup>17</sup> What Polanyi does in his review article is contrast Crowther's model of science and society with his own liberal narrative about science and society. He sketches a large-scale model of society as a network of what are dubbed "systems of dynamic order" (or sometimes "dynamic systems of order").<sup>18</sup> "Dynamic order" is a term Polanyi drew from the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Kohler's *Gestalt Psychology*, but Polanyi adapts Kohler's ideas for his own purposes.<sup>19</sup> Dynamic orders or systems of dynamic order are found in nature and in society. Kohler took a broad-  
visioned approach, drawing on "gestaltheorie," that suggested a dynamic order referred to any process that "dynamically distributes and regulates itself."<sup>20</sup> His approach likely appealed to

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<sup>16</sup> Polanyi, GT, 429. As the discussion below will make clear, the other parts of Polanyi's very general philosophical description of his 1941 article's purpose also are important:

We shall trace the principles of organization which are appropriate for the service of these ideals, and through which the intellectual and moral order of society is established and developed further. We shall show that these organizations must be free, and that they must conflict with the claims of a Totalitarian State. Finally, we shall demonstrate that the abandonment of the ideals of truth logically entails the replacement of these ideals by fanaticism coupled with cynicism—and that the establishment of a totalitarian rule of unscrupulous fanatics must follow (Ibid., 429).

<sup>17</sup> Nye, *Michael Polanyi and His Generation*, 65-66. See also GT, 428.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 438. See the detailed discussion of dynamic orders in Phil Mullins, "Michael Polanyi's Early Liberal Vision: Society as a Network of Dynamic Orders Reliant on Public Liberty," *Perspective on Political Science* 42 (2013): 162-171.

<sup>19</sup> Polanyi, GT, 435. Wolfgang Kohler's *Gestalt Psychology* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 193. There are other interesting suggestions in Kohler's discussion of how internal equilibration works in nature: such processes involve an interaction of elements, but this takes place within a framework provided by boundary conditions. From his early writing, Polanyi seems to have been interested in the way in

Polanyi since Polanyi could apply the notion of a “dynamic order” to crystal formation, embryo development, and evolution,<sup>21</sup> as well as to human social orders. Drawing on Kohler’s more philosophical ideas about dynamic order may also have been a very deliberate move by Polanyi, one intended to situate his 1941 discussion of social orders in a context more inclusive than the context of economic and political discussions of the market as a spontaneous or self-regulating order.

Polanyi’s general discussion of dynamic orders in a human social and political context follows his discussion of another kind of order, “corporate order” which he characterizes as hierarchically (i.e., vertically) organized and directed from above.<sup>22</sup> In Polanyi’s lexicon, there are thus “two kinds of order.”<sup>23</sup> Polanyi seems to think there are important places and times in which corporate orders are likely very useful (e.g., military operations in war), but he raises serious questions about the effectiveness of corporate orders for social tasks that largely depend on the contributions of many thinking human beings. Polanyi’s focus on social dynamic orders emphasizes horizontal rather than top-down organization and lateral interaction. Dynamic orders are thus self-regulating or self-organizing insofar as they are always in the process of adjustment; they are always re-balancing in seeking equilibrium.

Society, according to Polanyi, has many dynamic orders and the scope or comprehensiveness of such orders varies widely. Polanyi apparently thought that human beings normally participated in several dynamic orders simultaneously and some of these were broad orders that included many persons, and some were smaller and specialized. There are thus many interpretative communities or organized social niches with certain practices and the scope and nature of dynamic orders are not identical. Some orders are primarily intellectual, and some are focused around more practical concerns or artistic and religious activities. Some rely more on

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which boundary conditions bear upon and make possible certain processes. In Polanyi’s later thought, Polanyi emphasizes a hierarchical ontology that focuses on boundary conditions; his understanding of living forms and their evolution is linked to ideas about the function of boundary conditions.

<sup>21</sup> Polanyi, GT, 431-433.

<sup>22</sup> Polanyi, GT, 433-435. [*Editor’s note*: For more on Polanyi’s understanding of corporate order see also Straun Jacobs, “Polanyi’s New Liberalism and the Question of Democracy” in this issue of *Quaestiones Disputatae*.]

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

cooperation among participants, based on consultation, and some rely more on competition among participants. While Polanyi does point out that “the best known dynamic order in society is that of economic life,” he seems bent on avoiding reducing the complexity of society to economics.<sup>24</sup> Much of his discussion in GT is focused around three dynamic orders which are presented as analogs: science, British case law, and the market economy. But it is worth emphasizing that these orders have both family resemblances and some clear differences and Polanyi apparently thought both were important. Polanyi develops his account of the scientific dynamic order as the model of science that he poses as a counter to the model of planned science outlined by Crowther (see discussion below). But in this 1941 article, Polanyi emphasizes what he terms “the most varied types of dynamic order [which] are found in the intellectual and moral heritage of man.”<sup>25</sup> Polanyi’s early social philosophy thus envisions liberal society as a network of overlapping (and always already relatively well organized) subcultural domains (or interpretative communities), whose operation both stabilizes or preserves and transforms the cultural heritage:

There exist many other systems in the cultural heritage and moral sphere.... The social legacies of language, writing, literature and of the various arts; of practical crafts, including medicine, agriculture, manufacture and the techniques of communications; of sets of conventional units and measures, and of customs of intercourse; of religious, social and political thought; all these are systems of dynamic order which were developed by the method of direct individual adjustment, as described for Science and the Law.<sup>26</sup>

Polanyi emphasizes what he here dubs “the method of direct individual adjustment.” Social dynamic orders are self-adjusting because they rely upon human beings as capable autonomous agents who have skills and knowledge and the capacity to think, as well as having a commitment

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 436.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 438.

to the projects cultivated within a particular dynamic order. Thus, in the case of the dynamic order of science, those who want to be scientists learn in an apprenticeship the skills, values, guiding principles, and interests of the prevailing generation of scientists. They appropriate the current tradition of science with its prevailing ideas, but they do so in order to carve out and solve new problems for research that addresses such problems and thus which may transform prevailing ideas. Tradition is important in every dynamic order and the standard Enlightenment advice to dump tradition on the presumption that it is only an impediment is misleading.

Polanyi held the value of truth to be of paramount importance to scientists, and policies of the state must not undercut the importance that scientists give to discovering the truth. To join the community of scientists working in a particular neighborhood of science (i.e., focusing on certain kinds of questions or study) is to voluntarily take on certain responsibilities in addition to certain skills and problems. It is to become a participant in the ongoing public conversation about truth among scientists working in this dynamically ordered neighborhood. After one is a novice, one becomes a full-fledged member of the interpretative community (one who has contact with reality) and the public conversation among members generates the prevailing scientific opinion operative in the neighborhood. The public conversation transforms scientific opinion over time (revealing more fully the nature of reality) as new discoveries are made and assimilated. In Polanyi's account, this kind of growth in thought in science, or any other dynamic order, contributes to the larger Enlightenment project of illumining and liberating human life.

#### **4. Liberty and Science: The Importance of Public Liberty**

Polanyi regarded his liberal vision of science and society as the type of social order most likely to stimulate the growth of thought in society and at the same time maintain social stability in the midst of the change which the growth of thought promoted. His liberal vision of science and society as a network of evolving dynamic orders seems, of course, to be largely an ideal type. But he outlined his liberal vision as an alternative to another vision of social order (and perhaps

another ideal type) that he dubbed “totalitarian.”<sup>27</sup> Clearly, he regarded totalitarianism as at least partially manifest in the Soviet Union and fascist regimes of the thirties and forties, and his discussions often link developments in the Soviet Union and fascist governments.<sup>28</sup> However, Polanyi’s effort to articulate a liberal vision of science and society should be construed not only as a counter to the rise of totalitarianism, but also as a counter to the “extreme liberalism” (i.e., strict laissez-faire) that Polanyi held had often dominated in nineteenth and early twentieth century European politics and culture.<sup>29</sup> Polanyi’s focus on the growth of thought and ways to assimilate new ideas with a minimum of social upheaval was thus in his own view something like a middle way.

It was a middle way that focused on reforming earlier liberalism. Polanyi’s writing in the forties frequently articulated ideas about how the older economic and political framework of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 429. In the forties, Polanyi began working out a broader European historical-cultural development scheme—a grand narrative—making clear that the rise of totalitarian governments in the twentieth century reflects fundamental problems with the way in which science has been understood and appropriated in Western culture (see discussion below). The rise of totalitarian states, in Polanyi’s grand narrative, is thus in many ways the consequence or outgrowth of the ways in which the scientific revolution has been misconstrued. This misconstrual, which he sometimes called “scientism,” he linked to the social sciences and their influence on social policy and to the modern critical philosophical tradition and its broad negative cultural influence. [Editor’s note: For more on scientism, see Charles Lowney II, “Michael Polanyi: A Scientist Against Scientism” in *Critics of Enlightenment Rationality*, edited by Gene Callahan and Kenneth McIntyre. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 139-159.] Although science and critical thought have in many ways enhanced modern life, scientism also had a devastating fallout in Polanyi’s account. Pervasive skepticism undercuts belief and trust which are integral to human social life. Scientism has undermined the democratic experiments in governance and the traditions of liberalism that were themselves early positive outgrowths of the scientific revolution. It has brought, Polanyi later argues, problems of meaning that result in nihilism and “moral inversion.” [Editor’s note: For more on moral inversion see Richard Moodey’s “Confronting or Denying the Minotaur: ‘Moral Inversion’ Today” in this issue of *Quaestiones Disputatae*.] Polanyi’s historical account of totalitarianism is thus a component of his much broader critique of modern culture that is decisively shaped by a misreading of science. The details of Polanyi’s critical thinking about Western culture (i.e., its misreading of science, and undermining of science itself and liberal society and culture) are slowly sorted out in his writing over the last thirty years of his life. This is also the case with Polanyi’s counter to the dominant scientistic narrative, his effort to articulate a constructive “post-critical” philosophy that is a discovery-centered account of science and society. See the discussion below.

<sup>28</sup> The Marxist Soviet Union and fascist regimes are somewhat different but are members of the same species, in Polanyi’s account.

<sup>29</sup> Polanyi, CF, 56-60.

liberalism must be reworked.<sup>30</sup> He acknowledged the historical failures of liberalism, and he criticized the presumed foundations of recent liberal social philosophy and worked to reconceive liberal social philosophy. He recognized the scale of the destruction of the old European order in World War I and the problems of achieving peace. The excesses of extreme liberalism, he contended, brought policies that failed to address the problems of the postwar world and in fact brought the rise of fascism and World War II.<sup>31</sup> His 1940 collection of essays, *CF*, as noted above, argues that the excesses of extreme liberalism brought contempt on earlier ideas about liberty, effectively helping narrow ideas about the nature and importance of liberty. He also admitted that many progressive Europeans had come to believe that only governments and policies favoring centralization (like those promoted in popular writing about the Russian experiment) could now bring positive change moving toward a society promoting the common good.

Polanyi apparently believed his new ideas about social order could speak to both those overly influenced by totalitarianism and by extreme liberalism. That is, he aimed to restore intelligent public discourse by reframing the terminology for discussing liberty.<sup>32</sup> Polanyi regarded modern societies as complexly organized and, to avoid the excesses he saw in both communist and fascist states, he argued for a richer understanding of freedom that he identified as “a more general view of liberty, extending far beyond the claims of private freedom.”<sup>33</sup> He thus, in many discussions, distinguished “private” and “public” freedom (or liberty) and argued “public” liberty is a progressive force in modern society. This rhetorical strategy, however, needs to be viewed within the emerging broader philosophical framework of Polanyi’s ideas.

Although there have been authoritarian states in the past, totalitarian states, in Polanyi’s account, are modern phenomena that incorporate a peculiarly modern vision of the state. He outlined (in *GT*) his basic ideas about how most modern people of conscience think

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, ideas in Polanyi’s 1945 proposal for a new liberal journal discussed in Phil Mullins, “Michael Polanyi’s Effort to Rehabilitate Liberalism,” *Polanyiana: The Periodical of the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association* 30, no. 1 (2021):110-148.

<sup>31</sup> Polanyi, *CF*, 58.

<sup>32</sup> The Polanyi biographers William Scott and Martin Moleski, S. J. appropriately title their seventh chapter covering Polanyi’s intellectual development and writing during the years 1938-1947 “The Philosophy of Freedom” (Scott and Moleski, *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher*, 171).

<sup>33</sup> Polanyi, *GT*, 431.

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about the state and how this makes them open to elements of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism presupposes “social order is upheld by the commands of the State.”<sup>34</sup> That is, the totalitarian idea of the state presumes personal actions of individuals “can never claim to perform a social function that positively contributes to order; it can only be a private amusement, which if it affects the public, will—more often than not—result in a public nuisance.”<sup>35</sup> Individual human action and achievement are personal matters (i.e., matters concerned with the exercise of private freedom) and the common good is usually in tension with such personal matters, although rights of persons are to be protected. The state has the responsibility to represent the collective interests of the community and the state alone acts to promote those collective interests. And the modern state is organized as a hierarchical bureaucracy that seeks to govern by relying on explicit directives; it is, in a word, an emulation of an Enlightenment dream of order and explicit knowledge coordinated to produce effective action.<sup>36</sup>

Planned science was consistent with this Enlightenment dream, but Polanyi also construed the “planned science” movement as deeply infected by totalitarian ideas and he became an outspoken leader in the British resistance to this movement that aimed at making scientific research better fit current social needs, as identified in contemporary political processes. Ordinary modern people appreciate individual liberty and most frequently think that shaping the direction of scientific research is both a realizable possibility and the public responsibility of the state. But they seldom see, as Polanyi did, how dynamic orders such as science properly progress because of the individual choices of scientists and the horizontal organization of its institutions. Dynamic orders opened the opportunity for “public” liberty that went beyond private liberty.

Ideas and social practices concerned with “private” liberty, Polanyi suggested, slowly emerged historically as an outgrowth of the transformation from a feudal social order to a market

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 430.

<sup>36</sup> See the discussion, making use of Polanyi, in James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Polanyi’s ideas about complexity and sensible organizational strategies to address complexity suggest that he found proposals for endeavors such as large-scale planning to be unmanageable.

order. The obligations of serfs and peasants were tied to the land. But with the development of a cash economy, it eventually became possible for individuals to discharge obligations in cash. Liberty came to be regarded as largely private insofar as it was concerned with the control of an individual's time. Private liberty continued to be important in modern societies and often has been legally protected; Polanyi recognized that even totalitarian societies often allowed a wide range of private liberties. But he also recognized that totalitarian states were quick to reject exercises of freedom in which persons, in the name of truth, stood against policies set by the state. Polanyi held it was a mistake to think about freedom or liberty exclusively in terms of private liberty. In distinguishing "private" and "public" liberty, Polanyi pointed to the myriad duties that responsible persons voluntarily take up as agents deeply committed to the projects that are nurtured in a particular dynamic order. What Polanyi identifies as "public" freedom is not focused on individuals per se but on creating and protecting opportunities for persons in social niches, such as science, in which certain social tasks important to the common good are addressed.

As a historian of science, Polanyi strongly believed that the initiative, tenacity and groundbreaking work on good problems by extraordinary scientists pursuing discovery created early modern science and sustained contemporary science. And Polanyi eventually made clear (in his later more fully developed post-critical philosophy) that the kind of impassioned quest involved in investigating and solving a problem that motivates scientists is also driving all human knowing as it operates in the many areas of social life. By the mid-forties, Polanyi already is on the path to developing an epistemically-oriented but non-Cartesian philosophical perspective that he eventually calls his "post-critical" thought and "fiduciary" philosophy.<sup>37</sup> Persons are intellectually curious and capable of mastering complex skills; we are always already deeply embedded in cultural communities with living traditions and these open pathways for inquiry for human beings, pathways that explore more deeply our contact with reality. Public liberties or

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<sup>37</sup> See the limited discussion below on Polanyi's "post-critical" perspective and "fiduciary" philosophy. I do not attempt, in this short essay, fully to treat these summary terms that Polanyi uses to identify his mature philosophical perspective. See also discussion in Phil Mullins, "Introduction to the Gifford Lectures," 3-6, which is online only on the Polanyi Society website at <http://www.polanyisociety.org/Giffords/Intro-MP-Giffords-9-20-16.pdf>.



freedoms, are, in Polanyi's account, the means exercised by knowing persons as they dwell in living traditions in order to break out and reform such traditions. This process Polanyi sees as the growth of thought in society.

Although Polanyi greatly respected the ways in which the human discovery model had operated in modern science, he contended the impact of science in modernity has been decidedly mixed. Certainly, in many ways science reshaped the modern worldview and it brought a profound understanding of the natural world and this eventually brought all kinds of developments that changed the conditions of modern life. But, as I have indicated with regard to totalitarianism, Polanyi also contended that the way science has been interpreted in modernity has brought massive problems. After the scientific revolution, certain ideas about science were applied in social and economic contexts and these ideas (often cross-fertilized with modern Romantic ideas), focused attention in society on objectivity, methods of investigation, laws and their applicability to individuals. These ideas about science (particularly as promulgated by social science) in fact misrepresented science. They were scientistic ideas and in some of Polanyi's writing in the forties he sharply criticizes figures like Ricardo, Malthus, and Bentham. He sarcastically portrays these figures' discussions as a travesty of science in a 1946 essay, although he recognized that such ideas became culturally mainstream. This scientistic account of economics and society Polanyi calls a "new conception of society based on scientific pretention" and it posits certain laws operating inexorably in society.<sup>38</sup> This kind of misreading became the basis, Polanyi argued, for more recent mechanistic and utopian visions found in both extreme laissez-faire ideas and policies and in the overtly scientistic Marxian counter narrative emphasizing class warfare and the inevitable transformation of history.

In sum, Polanyi attempted to enrich the public's understanding of liberty in the European context of the forties by focusing attention on what he called "public" liberty, which

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Polanyi, "Social Capitalism," *Time and Tide*, (1946 [13 April]), 341, <http://polanyisociety.org/2020Zoom/1946-MP-Social-Capitalism-Time&Tide-edited-version.pdf>. In this brief and pointed opinion piece, Polanyi succinctly spells out several elements of his reading of modern social, economic and intellectual history. See also my analysis in Phil Mullins, "From Countering Utilitarianism to Countering Planning: Michael Polanyi's 'Social Capitalism' and Its Place in His Social Philosophy," *Polanyiana* 28 nos. 1 and 2 (2019): 12-14; <https://polanyiana.org/volumes/28>.

he often contrasted with “private” liberty.<sup>39</sup> Polanyi believed that he was articulating a richer understanding of freedom that once was self-evident. The self-evidence of public liberty had been undermined by the method of doubt applied to traditions, and doubt (or skepticism) was now pervasive in society and advertised as the solvent of all error in a modern scientific society. The “public” dimensions of the exercise of freedom had been further covered over by the rise of governments with a totalitarian conception of the state that had no constructive role for individual freedom in the public sphere, and their rise was itself the culminating turn of the critical philosophical era propelled by scientific ideas.

For Polanyi, “public” liberty is integral to the operation of the many “dynamic orders” of society and is visible in their practices that allow such orders to operate and to change. That is, participants in a particular dynamic order such as science or the justice system or the economy accept and rely on certain guiding principles and respect certain values and virtues. And as engaged parties do the work of a particular domain, such liberties implement the social duties of persons, and the interaction of mindful agents in the relational network brings evolutionary change to the network. Participants appropriate tradition and embody the ethos of the order in their practices and the order is thereby refashioned. To use terminology that Polanyi develops later, Polanyi’s “public liberties” are the “tacit dimension” operative in a particular dynamic order. That tacit dimension is picked up voluntarily in the socialization of agents and it operates in the action of agents interacting in that particular order. Insofar as domain participants take on certain roles and duties as scientists, lawyers, and judges or producers and consumers, and faithfully carry out responsibilities in that particular dynamic order, the order acquires a kind of coherence and it preserves, but also cultivates, its traditions and social heritage. It promotes the growth of thought.

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<sup>39</sup> Polanyi’s enrichment project is confusing because he attempts simultaneously to address both British “planned” science discussions and his broader reading of European intellectual history which concerns the rise of scientism and the recent rise of totalitarianism challenging liberalism (and liberalism itself has been recently influenced by scientism).

## 5. Science, Faith and Society and The Logic of Liberty

Polanyi's liberal vision of society is one in which intellectual dynamic orders such as science—but also literary, artistic, religious, and legal orders—have independence and cultivate their heritage. This liberal perspective Polanyi further developed in his 1946 Riddell Lectures, published as *Science, Faith and Society*.<sup>40</sup> In this book, Polanyi emphasizes tradition and discovery as central to science. But he makes clear that what he calls “modes of discovery” are primary not only in science but in other domains of endeavor in society:

We can generalise this to other modes of discovery in literature, in the arts, in politics. All these can advance only fragmentarily by the efforts of individuals within a community organised essentially on the lines of scientific life. The community must guarantee the independence of its active members in the service of values jointly upheld and mutually enforced by all. The creative life of such a community rests on a belief in the ever continuing possibility of revealing still hidden truths.<sup>41</sup>

Although SFS is a book largely focused on science, the final chapter moves beyond science per se to talk about the art of free discussion, free thought, civil liberties, and tolerance and fairness as important virtues in modern society. As Polanyi later says, the point he reached in SFS, made clear to him that “a dynamic free society ... cultivates a system of traditional ideas which have the power of unlimited self-renewal.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege and Oxford University Press, 1946; also: Chicago: University of Chicago Press [reprint], 1964), page citations are from the Chicago reprint. Hereafter, this title is abbreviated as SFS. There are many things in SFS that reflect the growing breadth of Polanyi's cultural and philosophical criticism as well as the growing scope of his own alternative constructive philosophical perspective. SFS reflects Polanyi's extension of social and political questions to areas of philosophy such as metaphysics and cosmology. Here I mention only ways Polanyi reconceives the importance of tradition as a seedbed linking tradition with discovery which is the engine of development in science. The drive to understand and seek the unknown is important in science and larger society and, for Polanyi, underlies the growth of thought across the many domains of human society.

<sup>41</sup> Polanyi, SFS, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Polanyi, PK, ix.

On the eve of his Gifford Lectures (1951-1952), Polanyi pulled together several essays from the forties that were published as *The Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders*, and he intended for his title to suggest that public liberty is a vital concern integrally connected to the cultivation of thought.<sup>43</sup> In an essay on academic freedom written in the late forties (incorporated as the third chapter of LL), Polanyi makes a basic distinction between understandings of “freedom” as an “individualist or self-assertive conception” and as “liberation from personal ends by submission to impersonal obligations.”<sup>44</sup> In another essay, he notes that “the logic of public liberty is to co-ordinate independent individual actions spontaneously in the service of certain tasks.”<sup>45</sup> Cultivating the growth of thought in intellectual orders like science is one of the social tasks that Polanyi rated highly important for modern society, although, as I have suggested, Polanyi supported a broad range of dynamic orders in which different kinds of public liberty could be exercised in order to cultivate the social heritage.

Polanyi says in his book’s Preface that he is making a strenuous effort “to clarify the position of liberty in response to a number of questions raised in our troubled period of history.”<sup>46</sup> He contends that “freedom of thought is justified in general to the extent to which we believe in the power of thought and recognize our obligation to cultivate the things of the mind.”<sup>47</sup> This statement in the Preface is followed up with the following incisive elaboration in the final chapter:

Public liberty can be fully upheld as an aim in itself, insofar as it is the method for the social management of purposes that are aims in themselves. Freedom of science, freedom of worship, freedom of thought in general, are public institutions by which society opens to its members the opportunity for serving aims that are purposes in themselves. By establishing these freedoms, society constitutes itself as a community

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). Hereafter this title is abbreviated in the text as LL and citations also use LL.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

of people believing in the validity and power of things of the mind and our obligation to these things. Logically, the acceptance of these beliefs is anterior to freedom. There is no justification for demanding freedom of thought unless you believe that thought has a power of its own.<sup>48</sup>

Polanyi included parts of his 1941 essay, “Growth of Thought” in the last chapter of LL and expanded here his discussion of public liberty. He stresses not only the role of public liberty in making society function, with all its diverse niches, but also the way in which public liberty is the mark of a free society: “A free society is characterized by the range of public liberties through which individualism performs a social function, and not by the scope of socially ineffective personal liberties.”<sup>49</sup>

LL is a book that makes clear that Polanyi now recognized not only Marxist thought but also much contemporary Anglo-American philosophical thought (called variously positivism, objectivism, and empiricism) as failing to provide an adequate foundation for science and a society in which thought can grow. Whereas Polanyi early on recognized that Marxist materialism undermined ideas, by the middle and late forties, he recognized most mainstream Western philosophical views as equally inadequate as a foundation for modern society. In SFS, Polanyi sharply criticizes positivism. In LL, he criticizes philosophical views that focus narrowly on causes rather than reasons and that dismiss commitment and belief.<sup>50</sup> In LL, Polanyi also identifies a “new intellectual period” as emerging, which he calls “the post-critical age of Western civilization,” a time in which “Liberalism ... is becoming conscious of its own fiduciary

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 158. Polanyi’s commitment to “public liberty” apparently led him to be critical of Popper’s notions about an Open Society from which he distinguishes “a free society.” Popper is not named but Popper’s social vision seems to be a more traditionally Enlightenment-rooted notion from which Polanyi distinguishes “a free society:” “A free society is not an Open Society, but one fully dedicated to a distinctive set of beliefs” (Ibid., vii). See also the discussion of “public liberty” in Struan Jacobs and Phil Mullins, “Michael Polanyi and Karl Popper: The Fraying of a Long-Standing Acquaintance” (*TAD* 38:2 (2011-12): 61-93.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 22-31.

foundations.”<sup>51</sup> And he notes in his Preface that these collected essays treat “the fiduciary presuppositions of scientific knowledge.”<sup>52</sup>

### 6. *Personal Knowledge*

Polanyi’s 1951 and 1952 Gifford Lectures and PK, which grew out of these lectures and was published in June 1958, made it very clear that Polanyi was working out a fiduciary philosophy which justifies “the holding of unproven traditional beliefs.”<sup>53</sup> All knowledge, including scientific knowledge, has a fiduciary foundation. Polanyi points out, in his Torchbook edition Preface, that his philosophical inquiry began with his 1939 review of J. D. Bernal’s *The Social Function of Science*, where he argued against the view that science “should be directed by the public authorities to serve the welfare of society.”<sup>54</sup> He countered this materialist Marxist view by proposing that “the power of thought to seek the truth must be accepted as our guide, rather than be curbed to the service of material interest.”<sup>55</sup> Later, Polanyi makes much the same point in discussing the kind of sociology needed:

Objectivism requires a specifiably functioning mindless knower. To accept the indeterminacy of knowledge requires, on the contrary, that we accredit a person entitled to shape his knowing according to his own judgement, unspecifiably. This notion—applied to man—implies in its turn a sociology in which the growth of thought is acknowledged as an independent force. And such sociology is a declaration of loyalty to a society in which truth is respected and human thought is cultivated for its own sake.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>53</sup> Polanyi, PK, ix.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 264. Nye argues, rightly I think, regarding this comment on sociology, that “Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge is the shark cruising beneath the surface waters of Polanyi’s argument” (Nye, *Michael Polanyi and His Generation*, 280).

Polanyi notes that non-Marxist Western philosophical thought has also failed adequately to provide a foundation justifying the power of thought. PK is a book that weaves together critical and constructive philosophizing. That is, PK clarifies the ways in which objectivist and reductionist Enlightenment traditions undermine confidence in the power of thought and a proper emphasis upon the growth of thought in society. Polanyi counters this in his constructive philosophizing, which included a *Lebensphilosophie* with his emphasis upon the human vocation as ongoing inquiry in the array of domains running from the sciences to the humanities:

The power of science to grow by the originality of individual thought is thus established within a cosmic perspective of steadily emergent meaning. Science, conceived as understanding nature, seamlessly joins with the humanities, bent on understanding man and human greatness.<sup>57</sup>

Polanyi's final note in his magnum opus points out "so far as we know, the tiny fragments of the universe embodied in man are the only centres of thought and responsibility in the visible world." Insofar as this is the case, thoughtful, inquiring human beings committed to the growth of thought appear to be "so far the ultimate stage in the awakening of the world."<sup>58</sup>

### *7. The Study of Man, The Tacit Dimension and Meaning*

The thin volume titled *The Study of Man*, which appears in the year after PK, announces in its opening sentence that "man's capacity to think is his most outstanding attribute."<sup>59</sup> This is a book in which Polanyi indicated that the first two of its three chapters recapitulate relevant parts of the argument of PK in order to extend the argument, in the final chapter, to analyze the nature of historical studies.<sup>60</sup> Again and again, Polanyi emphasizes the importance of thought for human beings. An articulate framework extends the human body and links us with other human

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<sup>57</sup> Polanyi, PK, xi.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 11. Hereafter this title is abbreviated as SM and citations also use SM.

<sup>60</sup> See Polanyi's discussion in his Preface (Ibid., 9).

beings in a social milieu; such a framework allows a kind of probing and reflection that seems beyond other animals: “Human thought grows only within language and since language can exist only in a society, all thought is rooted in society.”<sup>61</sup> Polanyi argues that, when viewed in a cosmic perspective, “a literate process of thought” is a very recent human achievement and it defines the particular calling of human beings.<sup>62</sup> Thought “represents the highest level of reality in our experience.”<sup>63</sup> Polanyi makes clear, of course, in his book that human thought rightfully and responsibly can study the personalities of dramatic history. Such a study is a deeply participative and important endeavor that is in continuity with scientific studies. What Polanyi envisions as the “purely mental life of man” considers the succession of comprehensive levels of reality. This, Polanyi says, is “man’s distinctive form of existence, evoked by his intellectual passions from the soil of a cultural heritage: a life of thought, bent on the search for truth and other manners of excellence akin to truth.”<sup>64</sup>

*The Tacit Dimension*, perhaps Polanyi’s most popular book, is primarily a refinement of the epistemology articulated in PK.<sup>65</sup> Although there are many complementary ideas that Polanyi also briefly outlines, Polanyi here works out more fully the structure of tacit knowing.<sup>66</sup> He notes that the overall title of the original 1962 Terry Lectures on which this late book was based was “Man in Thought”<sup>67</sup> and that “it is the image of humanity immersed in potential thought that I

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company 1966; Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2009), x. Hereafter the abbreviation TD is used for this Polanyi text; citations use the page numbering in the 1967 Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company edition.

<sup>66</sup> Polanyi packs a great deal into TD and some underdeveloped themes were earlier developed and are also later developed in articles and Polanyi’s 1976 final co-authored book, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), discussed further below. For example, he notes, far too succinctly, that “the ideas of the Enlightenment bred scientism and romanticism” and this has engendered in contemporary society the “hybrid of absolute skepticism and perfectionism” which brought in the twentieth century new movements in the arts which were “prefiguring modern fanaticism, with all their tyrannies and cruelties” (TD, 83). Although TD focuses on refining Polanyi’s epistemology--and this is part of the late development of Polanyi’s constructive “post-critical” philosophy-- he nevertheless in TD weaves with his discussion important elements of his sharp criticism of the modern critical philosophical tradition giving rise to the crisis in modern Western culture.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 90.



find revealing for the problems of our day.”<sup>68</sup> Here he characterizes the scientific tradition and indeed other traditions of free thought in a society as deriving the “capacity for self-renewal from its belief in the presence of a hidden reality, of which current science is one aspect, while other aspects of it are to be revealed by future discoveries.”<sup>69</sup> What Polanyi strongly affirms in TD is “the metaphysical grounds of intellectual life in a free, dynamic society” which he calls “a society of explorers.”<sup>70</sup> He describes such a dynamic orthodox thinking society and its traditional roots as follows:

Any tradition fostering the progress of thought must have this intention: to teach its current ideas as stages leading to unknown truths which, when discovered, might dissent from the very teachings which engendered them. Such a tradition assures the independence of its followers by transmitting the conviction that thought has intrinsic powers, to be evoked in men’s minds by intimations of hidden truth.”<sup>71</sup>

Polanyi points out (much as he did in 1941 in GT) that totalitarian rulers fear “circles” in which “man lives in thought—in thought over which the rulers have no power.” Polanyi also suggests that the sometimes-troubling diversity of society in which perspectives seem radically in conflict is “transcended by a test which proves that all such groups effectively foster the intrinsic power of thought.”<sup>72</sup> Finally, Polanyi warns that

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 82. These ideas (sketched in TD) about the fecundity of belief in the presence of a hidden reality go back SFS where Polanyi outlined similar metaphysical roots of science and other domains of inquiry.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 82. Polanyi insists that thought strives for the truth and responsible inquiry advances because it is necessarily put forth with universal intent. Polanyi likely would have dissented from much of the late twentieth century Neo-Kantian, postmodern account of thought that flourished after his death and celebrates pluralism in ways that do not appreciate the convergence of thought. Humans are fallible knowers and there are no God’s eye views, but neither are we condemned to a radical pluralism insofar as thought strives for truth and there is a growth of thought in society.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 84.

even the most revolutionary mind must choose as his calling a small area of responsibility, for the transformation of which he will rely on the surrounding world as its premise. Perfectionism, which would transform the whole of thought and the entire society, is a program of destruction, ending up at best in a world of pretense.”<sup>73</sup>

Just as in his writing in the early forties, Polanyi remains, thirty years later, focused on nurturing the growth of thought as the peculiar human calling, and he regards thought as that which can and will change the social order. But he recognizes that this approach to change is challenged in modernity by the utopian ideas which are the historical outgrowth of a misreading of the scientific revolution.

As Polanyi became frail in his last years, his collaborator Harry Prosch took on the role as the final shaper of the material in *Meaning*, which was primarily based on the three sets of the Meaning Lectures (1969, 1970 and 1971).<sup>74</sup> But Prosch also drew upon other earlier Polanyi writing.<sup>75</sup> The architectonic of the book proceeded “from the destruction of meaning to its restoration,” showing “how the meanings established in science and those achieved in the humanities ... can be brought into existential harmony through recognition of the existence of meaningful order in the world.”<sup>76</sup> Polanyi’s final turn to problems of meaning is hardly a completely new direction since Polanyi’s earlier writing had already described the destruction of meaning and culture effected by the misreading of the scientific revolution and the rise of objectivism. He also had hinted at (i.e., in sometimes puzzling cursory discussions) the ways in which myth, art and religion have meaning.<sup>77</sup> *Meaning* does shift the focus somewhat from the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). Hereafter the abbreviation M is used for this book in the text and the notes.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., xiii. For an extensive analysis of the Prosch-Polanyi collaboration, see Phil Mullins and Martin Moleski, S.J., “Harry Prosch: A Memorial Re-Appraisal of the *Meaning* Controversy,” *Tradition and Discovery* 32, no. 2 (2005-06): 8-24.

<sup>76</sup> Polanyi and Prosch, M., x. For the framing first and last chapters which explain the eclipse of thought and anticipate the restoration of thought, Prosch acknowledges he drew heavily on LL as well as PK and some other sources. See comments in *ibid.*, xiii (noted above) as well as M, 227-228.

<sup>77</sup> Ron Hall and Bruce Haddock, soon after the book was published, observed that there is much in *Meaning* that pulls science and the humanities apart, and that this is directly contrary to themes emphasized in books like

growth of thought to the recovery and growth of meaning in modern society. This is clear, for example, in the book's comments on a free society: "a free society is regarded as one that does *not* engage, on principle, in attempting to control what people find meaningful, and a totalitarian society is regarded as one that does, on principle, attempt such control."<sup>78</sup> Polanyi and Prosch propose that we should "believe in the existence of a general movement toward the attainment of meaning in the universe" or at least, if we cannot "believe that one of the structuring principles in the world is a gradient of meaning," we may, nevertheless, "still be brave enough to hold fast to all of the meanings we have been able to achieve, regarding them as the most precious things we possess."<sup>79</sup>

In conclusion, Polanyi and Prosch's effort in *Meaning* is to set forth a succinct narrative focusing on (1) the destruction of certain kinds of meaning in modernity and (2) the post-critical philosophical grounds for a recovery. This narrative complements Polanyi's effort in earlier writing to analyze the dangerous liabilities of modern culture (rooted in a mis-reading of science) and counter these liabilities with his alternative post-critical philosophical perspective that, from early to late, focuses attention on the growth of thought in society. This notion of the growth of thought is one in which freedom is essential, but also important is the notion of that post-critical reason can effectively drive progress and that morality can provide transcendent principles: "... freedom of thought is rendered pointless and must disappear, where reason and morality are deprived of their status as a force in their own right."<sup>80</sup>

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PK and SM. See Ronald L. Hall, "Michael Polanyi on Art and Religion: Some Critical Reflections on *Meaning*," *Zygon* 17, no. 1 (1982), 9-18, and Bruce Haddox, "Questioning Polanyi's *Meaning*. A Response to Ronald Hall," *Zygon* 17, no. 1 (1982), 19-24. I believe their case has merit. Polanyi (and not simply Harry Prosch) certainly is partially responsible for this. His *Meaning* Lectures, for example, show Polanyi reified distinctions between the natural and the transnatural. But I also believe that Prosch—who does have a very particular way of reading Polanyi's ontology—also contributes to Polanyi's tendency to affirm this bifurcation. See my discussion of Prosch's views in the analysis of Prosch's criticism of Marjorie Grene's discussion of Polanyi in Phil Mullins, "Marjorie Grene and *Personal Knowledge*," *Tradition and Discovery* 37, no. 2 (2010-11): 29-34.

<sup>78</sup> Polanyi and Prosch, M, 182.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> LL, 107.