

The “Tacit Dimension” in Isaac the Syrian’s Theory of the Perception of Spiritual Beings

Michael Polanyi’s reconsideration of human knowledge begins with the principle that “we can know more than we can tell,”¹ and that the ultimate power behind our knowing is in fact the tacit action of “shaping and integrating” the particulars of accumulated information -- that it is by this power we come to know something, and hold true that which we have come to know.² When we understand the tacit dimension, then, our ultimate interest in understanding shifts from the mode of perception, collection and analysis of a particular kind of data to the observation and imitation of “scientific and artistic genius,”³ which subsequently and consequently involves imitating a pattern of engagement with knowledge-area and disciplinary particulars.

I find these ideas from Polanyi quite attractive, and indeed quite helpful in some of my work reflecting the on the mechanisms that undergird ancient spiritual traditions, and their transmission both historically and into the present. I would like to make some comments that expand on Polanyi’s paradigm, however, flowing from my own preliminary attempts to appropriate some of his ideas in my own research and reflection as a historical theologian. In particular, I will focus on this last point, the imitation of “scientific and artistic genius” as a way of knowing and coming to know.

I would like to suggest, first of all, that there is another type of genius that we should take into consideration. Of course, Polanyi gives no indication that this list of “geniuses” is intended to be exhaustive, but he has made an omission that is -- at least in my view -- especially regrettable: indeed, he has left out of the discussion what is arguably the most basic and most important form of genius, namely, “religious genius.” It is “basic” because it is a fundamental ground on which human experience and longing, story and sociality are all bound together before either art or science is defined, and even in our so-called “scientific age,” it remains an explicit dimension of being and experience for many people -- if not, arguably, in some form, for all. It is “important” because, at the very least, religion is itself -- as *re-ligio*, renewing the ligatures, binding together -- a kind of fundamentally connective, fundamentally integrative knowledge, proclaiming and promulgating a unity of belief and behavior, identity and ethics; inventing a culture out of a *cultus*. At times, moreover, religion makes the bold and perhaps fool-hearty attempt -- not just to tell of that which is known but is beyond telling, but to know and to tell of that which, because it has been revealed, is

¹ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 4.

² Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 6

³ Ibid.

absolutely beyond even knowing itself. The claim is strong, brazen -- some would say preposterous. Some accept it, some reject it, some try to pretend that it isn't there, but no one can ignore it. The ultimate expression of "religious genius," then -- in this sense -- may be that summary of Jesus's teaching we find in the Synoptic Gospels: "The time has come, the Kingdom of God is at hand -- repent, and believe the Gospel."⁴

Few fully attain to "religious genius," of course, but all participate in it, all are affected by it - and much the same can be said -- as Polanyi rightly intuited and insinuates -- of "scientific and artistic genius" as well. Having a great prophet in our midst can transform the way we see the world, as well as life and landscape of our community, in much the way a great scientist or a great artist can. Indeed, such geniuses can change the very course of human history. But, of course, "religion" is a loaded term, and bears a lot of baggage: it was wise, perhaps, for Polanyi to generally avoid the category despite the religious resonances of some of his work and the utility some theologians have found in it. For our part, we shall leave the term here also for being too broad, ultimately, and somewhat confusing for our purposes. In place of the "religious person" and "religious genius," then, I shall speak more narrowly of "the ascetic" and "ascetical genius:" the focus of our consideration is that person who, through systematic devotion and psychospiritual exercise, uncovers and articulates a comprehensive imaginal structure of the mediating realities that stand between the human and the divine.⁵ Her genius is one "from on high," but not strictly so: it has a deep, practical earthiness about it. It has some tradition, some institutional component to it -- since, contrary to a popular belief, genius is never purely *ex nihilo* and strictly individual -- as Polanyi understood quite well -- but it is also deeply personal and thoroughly appropriated: it is not a mere wooden repetition of the beliefs, opinions, and practices of a bygone era.

I want to consider, secondly, some of the hidden valences of this term "genius." Polanyi has picked up this term from its modern, casual invocation, and breezed by it rather carelessly. It is overwhelmingly normative today that the term "genius" be employed as an immediate descriptor for any person of remarkable intellect: thus we say, "So-and-so is a genius," either in general, or with respect to a particular subject matter, and we might even attempt quantify it with something like an IQ. But in older usage, the especially clever fellow was not described *as* a genius -- instead, it was

⁴ Mark 1:15; cf also Mat. 3:2, Luke 4:14-30.

⁵ This definition of the ascetic is my own, although I am drawing together strands from the way that historians like Peter Brown, Elizabeth Clark, and David Brakke have imagined the role of the ascetic in late ancient society, and the imaginal mechanisms suggested by the Islamicist Henry Corbin as a framework for interpreting the apocalyptic language and imagery that seemed to thrive in monastic circles.

said that he *had* a genius. His particular knowledge, insight, skill -- these were not a part of his character, but were instead a personal possession of a peculiar type of interior agency. They were not just possessions of his person, however, they were conceptualized as invisible intelligences -- even intelligences possessing their own personalities -- who channeled some kind of supernatural charism into the soul with which they communed. The demon of Socrates, the deity of Caesar, the poet's muse -- all are "geniuses" in this sense: spiritual personalities permeating and interpenetrating the individuated mortal soul and lifting up the humanity of their subject to superhuman insights and superhuman feats. Already, then, even that long obsolete usage betrays something of a secularized character: on the logic of the ancient theosophy from which the term "genius" is drawn, it may be more proper, in fact, to speak -- not of the soul in possession of a genius, but rather, of a genius in possession of the soul.

These two themes converge, as the title of my title paper suggests, in reading Polanyi alongside the theory of the perception of spiritual beings laid out by St. Isaac the Syrian.⁶ Although not known widely or well today, this seventh century monastic and sometime Bishop of Nineveh for the "Nestorian" Church of the East exemplified tremendous "ascetical genius," to such an extent that his writings were preserved and passed on as beloved monastic literature even outside of his own community, expanding -- in the centuries following his death -- beyond confessional and even beyond linguistic boundaries, to become some of the most enduringly popular spiritual literature in Greek, and several other of the languages of eastern Christendom.⁷

Moreover, like many of his contemporaries in the late ancient world⁸ -- and indeed, like his co-religionists in the traditions of Syriac Christianity in particular,⁹ St. Isaac had a keen and vivid

⁶ Because of their dispersal and popularity, there are numerous thorny questions and unsolved problems with the text of Isaac's corpus that I will be ignoring for the purposes of this paper. For our purposes, I will be restricting my engagement with his thought to the English translation of Dana Miller, *The Ascetical Homilies of Isaac the Syrian*, (Holy Transfiguration Monastery: Boston, MA, 1984), hereafter abbreviated *AH*, as being representative of the broadest available collection of his writings preserved in different forms and languages. I will note when I am deviating from that translation in favor of another edition.

⁷ Isaac's writings were first appropriated by the (monophysite) West Syrian churches, and translated into Greek from these in the late-8th or early-9th C. Isaac is excerpted in the famous 11th C. *Evergetinon*, and the 12th collection of Peter of Damascus, which is the principal form in which Isaac is represented in the famous jewel of hesychastic spirituality, the *Philokalia*. Isaac was also quoted widely by the hesychastic saints of the 14th C, and translated into Slavonic and Russian beginning in the same century. See Miller's comments in *AH* lxxiv and following; also Sebastian Brock, "An Ecumenical Role Played by Monastic Literature: The Case of St Isaac the Syrian," *One in Christ: A Catholic Ecumenical Review* 40:3 (2005): 53-58.

⁸ Particularly helpful here is Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

sense of the ubiquitous presence of spiritual beings in the world around him and the world within him. To him, these beings were as much as real and an integral part of the landscape of the unseen as “germs” or “cholesterol” are to us today: they loomed large in the imagination and had an effect on the day to day decisions of every person in society, even though most people had probably never seen them, or reflected with any great depth on their character or existence. Unlike germs, however, these spiritual beings were creatures of extreme intelligence and rich cosmological and psychological significance, standing between heaven and earth and permeating all of human experience. They were the “messengers” of God, spirits of “flame and fire;” “ministers sent to serve the heirs of salvation.”¹⁰ Created “in silence” at the dawn of the worlds,¹¹ the angels were arranged, rank upon rank in their majestic hierarchies as worshippers and witnesses of the Divine Wisdom and Work, transmitting the divine illuminations and participating in his actions as he ordains.¹² Their perfect, sleepless obedience and unceasing worship was a model for the monk, who at his perfection was lauded as “equal to the angels.”¹³ More than this -- and perhaps above all -- they were intimate companions and protectors, allies against the malicious snares of the devil and the demons upon the battleground of the human heart.¹⁴ “The heart itself is but a small vessel,” wrote one of Isaac’s major antecedents in the spiritual lineage of Syriac Christianity, an author remembered spuriously as St. Marcarius, “yet dragons are there, and there are also lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. But there too is God, the angels, the life and the kingdom, the light and the apostles, the heavenly cities and the treasuries of grace -- all things are there.”¹⁵ Isaac himself echoes

⁹ Regrettably, this theme has not yet been given a proper attention specific to its appearance in the Syriac tradition. In brief, it suffices to note the unique approach in early Syriac theologians like Ephrem and Aphrahat; the Biblical legends of the *Cave of Treasures* and the *Book of the Bee*, and on -- especially -- into bar Sundali (the probable author of the work we have as *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*) and [pseudo]-Dionysius the Areopagite, the most famous of all, who -- although writing in Greek -- demonstrably hails from the Syriac milieu. Isaac references Dionysius, knowing of him in the Syriac translation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* made by Sergius of Reshana.

¹⁰ Heb. 1:14, quoted by Isaac in AH 28 (140); Psalm 104:4 alluded to in AH 26 (132).

¹¹ A popular trope of Syriac angelology, in Isaac at -- for instance -- AH 26 (132). This diverges from the standard account in the Greek and Latin Fathers, where the angels are more frequently considered to be made alongside the visible world.

¹² Isaac echoes Dionysius and *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* at these points. See for instance AH 28 (139f) and AH 26 (129-32).

¹³ This principle, drawing its Scriptural warrant from Mar 12:25 and Mat 22:30, was a major cornerstone of monastic angelology shared with Greek and Latin sources.

¹⁴ This was a popular theme of monastic spirituality, especially as systematized by Evagrius -- see the prologue to his *Antirrhētikos* and his *Praktikos*. In Isaac, see AH 5 (42-45) and AH 39 (189-196).

¹⁵ Pseudo-Marcarius, Homily 43:7.

this sentiment, “Heaven is within you -- if indeed you are pure -- and within it you will see both the angels in their light and their Master with them and in them.”¹⁶

Yet Isaac was heir, not just to a tradition of evocative language with respect to some hypothetical spiritual beings, but a way of life and pattern of psychospiritual practice that gave this language a stable and comprehensible experiential framework. And, of course, these were also grounded and sustained by metaphysical tradition transmitted by culture of literature and education that served to link Isaac’s sense of these beings to a reality beyond the culturally and linguistically constituted situation. Regrettably, while Isaac is well-loved as a devotional author, he has been understudied in his historical context: the latest critical edition of Isaac’s corpus is tremendously out of date,¹⁷ and misses many of the deep connections that need to be probed in parsing Isaac’s understanding. More than that, we know regrettably little about the particular shape of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophical traditions in the Syriac milieu, besides their feverish translation and eager adaptation.¹⁸ There is no question that he is attuned to many of the conversations the Greek Patristic tradition, and had certainly read a number of Greek Fathers in translation, particularly the Cappadocians, and the heroes of the “Nestorian” East Syriac Christology, Theodore of Mopsuestia in particular.¹⁹ Unfortunately, however, we have nothing like a comprehensive picture of his source material, but these, at least, were the kinds of traditions which formed Isaac’s tacit understanding. They are also, accordingly, the traditions upon which he drew when in approaching the question of how human beings are capable of perceiving incorporeal beings, to which we will now turn.

According to the Syrian, “The direct apprehension of every simple and subtle nature of spiritual bodies comes within the grasp of the sense faculty of human nature in three ways.” There are three types of manifestations that “the holy angelic powers employ” in their fellowship with

¹⁶ AH 15 (84).

¹⁷ Bejdan's Syriac text (1903) is still the standard, being recently reprinted by Georgias Press, with the “second part” -- preserved only in Syriac -- rediscovered in the mid-twentieth century and put out in edition by Sebastian Brock in 1995.

¹⁸ See Ephrem-Isa Yousif, *La floraison des philosophes syriaques*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003, and Daniel King, "Continuities and Discontinuities in the History of Syriac Philosophy," in *De l'Antiquité tardive au Moyen Âge. Études de logique aristotélicienne et de philosophie grecque, syriaque, arabe et latine offertes à Henri Hugonnard-Roche*. Edited by Coda, Elisa and Martini Bonadeo, Cecilia. *Études musulmanes* 44. Paris: Vrin, 2014. 225-244.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Nestor Kavvadas, "Some Observations on the Theological Anthropology of Isaac of Nineveh and its Sources", *Scriinium* 4 (2008): 147-157. Isaac's Greek sources are often more discussed than his Syriac precedents, because the Greek sources are typically more accessible and familiar -- and generally better preserved. Appreciation is growing for Isaac's Syriac precedents, however -- see for instance Jason Scully's recent dissertation, "Isaac of Nineveh's Contribution to Syriac Theology: An Eschatological Reworking of Greek Anthropology" (Marquette, 2013).

mankind “for our instruction and the establishment of our life,” and two of these that can be employed against us by the deceptive demons.²⁰ But what, precisely, is the quality of that sense experience by which, according to Isaac, we are able to perceive the “bodies” of these spiritual beings? In our context, claims of angelic or demonic visitation are usually considered psychological or literary phenomenon; a kitschy fiction, a mystical encounter located in the imagination, or maybe some kind of “out of body” visionary experience at best: at any rate, such reports are not usually considered in the same category -- or with the same credibility -- as sensate experiences. So was Isaac somehow exaggerating, bending his experience to fit a dogmatic expectation? Or was he, in fact, somehow seeing something that we are not seeing?

Polanyi’s analysis of the distinction between and integration of proximal and distal awareness is helpful in addressing this question.²¹ What Isaac seems to be relying on here is a kind of capacitated perception: he is referring implicitly to a series of psychosomatic and interpretive exercises practiced within his monastic tradition that enabled the ascetic to have these kinds of apprehensions, much as a scientist might use a probe, or some other piece of equipment to extend the range of her own sensory experience, in such a way that the probe in fact becomes transparent, becomes a part of her own sensory apparatus. In either case, the data collected and interpreted through the practices of sensory extension imparts to the knower the confidence to assert that what they have experienced and understood from the experience is real and reliable, and pass this knowledge on to others. Allow me to trace this theme through Isaac’s particular reasoning in somewhat greater detail.

The first mode of apprehension of spiritual beings that Isaac describes is a perception according to “density of substance.” This is a “non-essential” mode of perception -- the spiritual being is not seen “in its essence” or as it “actually is,” but under the form of some sort of assumed “dense” body, or some other kind of physical representation. Such a body is perceived precisely the way that we perceive all other bodies, through the physical processes by which data are supplied to our five senses, and then interpreted by the mind. The angel or demon can elect to appear to us in this “dense” form whether or not we like it, since, as Isaac says, “the senses take in everything that comes to pass independently of the will.” The question of the reliability and interpretation of sense data still remains -- how do we know that what we have seen wasn’t just a hallucination? and how do

²⁰ AH 28 (137).

²¹ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 12-15.

we know that what we have seen was an angel or demon, and not some other object? -- but Isaac doesn't address this question here: in any case, the manifestation at this level is the least congruent with the nature of a spiritual being, and therefore is least instructive for us. Indeed, Isaac doesn't do much more than affirm that these kinds of things happen.

Isaac's second mode of apprehension is the perception according to the "subtly of substance." Another "non-essential" mode of perception, to behold an angel or a demon in this way is also to encounter some sort of representation of the being, rather than seeing it in and of itself. Rather than appearing to our physical senses, however, in this case, we would see the being "superficially" through the "mind." This point seems to rely on Galenic physiology, which I suspect Isaac to be receiving through Nemesius of Emesa:²² in describing spiritual bodies as "subtle," Isaac indicates is that he imagines them as a kind of "mist," -- *rubo* being the key Syriac term; *pneuma* in the Greek, both terms encompassing connotations of "breath" and even "vapor" as well as "spirit" -- which the ancient physicians understood as subintellective components of the soul moderating the underlying physical biological processes. The soul, then, like the spiritual being, is "subtle," and by sharing this common "subtle" quality with the human soul, an angel or demon is capable of directly impressing itself on the sense faculty²³ from within, rather than stimulating it from without in the form of a physical object. This would be the kind of manifestation we experience in a dream or in a vision.

Of course, questions of interpretation then become paramount here: how do I know, for instance, whether it is an angel or demon that has stirred up my dreams, or the effects of what I had for dinner? Or more pressingly still, if I have a beautiful, powerful vision, how do I know it was the gift of an angel, and not the deception of a demon? The ascetical tradition gives a lot of time to this concern under the rubrics of "discernment."²⁴ Isaac gives only us a something of a shorthand indication of this problem here by noting that the "will" is determinative in this sort of vision. Indeed, Isaac asserts that "the will is the cause, and these [visions] are the offspring of the free will, even if the free will and faculty of volition are quiet at the time of [the visions]."

It may sound like what Isaac is saying here that the ascetic can frivolously and arbitrarily "want" to see an angel or demon and -- poof -- there it is. Admittedly, his language (which is rather

²² This is really just a hunch on my part: I have not found this thesis developed in the secondary literature.

²³ Or other physical biological processes, for that matter, since for Galen these are undergirded by distinct *pneumas*, but those interventions would not be sensible by definition, or else sensed only indirectly.

²⁴ In Isaac, see AH 58 (286-287) and AH 68 (331-334).

frustratingly obscure) could be read that way -- with the puzzling remainder of the possibility that the volitional faculty may be completely quiescent at the time of the vision. Such a reading really fails to do justice to the subtlety and complexity of Isaac's thought in its full scope, however. Instead, what he seems to be insinuating is that the orientation of the will effected through ascetic exercise and formation capacitates the accurate discernment of those spirits that impress themselves upon the sense perception through their sympathetic bond with the human soul. The volitional capacities do not need to be operative for the visions themselves, but they are what enable the ascetic to accurately parse a transcendental vision from the otherwise homogenous totality of his ordinary psychic experience as a human being. In other words, where most people experience their perceptions of the world as a continuous "horizontal" phenomenon -- occasionally punctuated, perhaps, by the coincidence ascribed to supernatural intervention, or the dream given a spiritual cause -- the ascetic becomes sensitive to the "vertical" in-breaking of angelic and demonic agencies upon their imaginal-perceptual framework, and indeed, becomes capable of detecting, naming, and parsing the same phenomenon in the experiences of others.

The third form of angelic manifestation Isaac identifies is the "essential vision" or "true *theoria*." This perception takes place in the "light of the soul and what strengthens the same." As with the psychical manifestations, these too are enabled by the capacitating preparation and operation of the will, however, unlike the other two modes of perception, the sense faculty is entirely bypassed. Instead, these visions "set the natural thoughts in motion and enlighten them." It is no longer the sense faculty that is operative as the organ of perception, but the intellect.

In that case, however, in what way can the experience that Isaac is talking about still be called a "sensation?" Here is something of a paradox: this mode of vision is an apprehension that transcends sensation, but for this reason, it suffuses and illuminates sensory experience. It is this kind of vision, as a light that enables vision, which subsequently and retrospectively enables the ascetic to distinguish between the beneficent activity of the angels, the natural motions of the soul, and the deception of the demons within the realm of sensate and co-sensory experience. It is an enhanced and focused light of insight that both stimulates and exceeds our natural cognitive processes, grounding a deeper and more fulsome communion with the Real. It is a revelatory light, either in the sense of revealing a deeper truth about a discrete perceptual or imaginal subject, or even in the sense of imparting new conceptual categories upon which ordinary cognitive processes depend. In its simple action of illumination, moreover, it shines with an unwavering confidence that at least not matches in magnitude if not exceeds that which is born of our own natural interior light,

the light whereby (for instance) we know first principles, we know ourselves, we know our experiences.²⁵

Isaac makes this point especially clear in a homily on the divine *theoria*, in which he reverses the apprehensive process outlined in his homily on the perception of spiritual beings. “Our veracious vision of the angels consists in our being moved by spiritual intuitions concerning those things which pertain to them,” he writes:

It is, indeed, impossible for us to behold the spiritual powers outside the domain of our intellect. When a man is deemed worthy to behold them in their very nature and in their own realm and as it were in their spiritual and created state, grace moves his intellect by the revelation of spiritual intuitions concerning them. When the soul is purified and has been accounted worthy of beholding her fellow servants, the vision of them is not received with these physical eyes ... but when angels appear to men in certain forms, this is not true vision, but on the order of a dispensation the angels confer these things in their ministry, or they manifest themselves through a vision involving the senses for the comfort and encouragement of the simple. Indeed, such visions are even seen by impure men. The first order of visions, however, belongs to the illuminated and wise men who have been exalted by the glorious discipline of *hesychia* to the rank of purity.²⁶

Isaac categorically excludes the possibility that the demons might affect us in the realm of the intellectual perception of divine light. The demons must manipulate us through the senses, or through sympathetic impressions made upon the soul: “they have no power whatsoever to set in motion the natural thoughts of our intellect,” much less imitate the purity of the divine light shining extrinsically upon the soul. Once angels themselves, they do share in angelic keenness and their swiftness of comprehension, but their will has become perverted, and their intellect -- correspondingly -- darkened, cut off from the fount of heavenly light. Nevertheless, the demons do in fact know many true things and sometimes they even speak the truth²⁷ -- although always for their own nefarious purposes -- but this is not an “enlightenment,” so much as it is a mere communication of knowledge. Fundamentally, however, there is no “endarkening” power of the demons to correspond with and oppose the “enlightening” power of the angels. Satan may disguise himself as “an angel of light,”²⁸ but this demonic light is invariably a physical or psychological phenomenon that does not attain to nor even approach the noetic.

Nevertheless, human fallibility maintains, even with the possibility of beholding an infallible light. We may still confuse the lesser forms of luminosity with the intellectual light communicated by

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas makes this point in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III Q.154.24.

²⁶ AH 22 (115-116)

²⁷ AH 28 (138). This is something of a trope in late ancient ascetical literature, being treated quite frequently. The monks evidently had some kind of experience of demons offering prophecy that would turn out to be true that required an explanation!

²⁸ 2Cor 11:14, in Isaac's analysis of varieties of demonic deceptions in AH 39 (193).

the angels, or even the natural light of our own intellect -- and often we do. However, if a genuine communion with that light is achieved, what emerges is an insight that fundamentally corresponds to reality and draws the ascetic inward and upward and onward, deeper into the heart of the ultimate. The impression that this leaves upon the soul as a kind of residue has the character of true knowledge, deep insight: *katalepsis*, as the Stoics might call it,²⁹ or in Polanyi's evocative turn of phrase, the sense of "indefinite future manifestations."³⁰

It's hard to say how Polanyi might have received Isaac's theory of angelic illumination. On the one hand, like many modern thinkers -- and scientists especially -- Polanyi is ultimately more concerned with the process and procedure of knowing -- and particularly knowing in the modern and scientific sense -- rather than receiving and communicating a particular transcendent principle that can undergird knowing as such. His questions and explorations, however, lead him toward these kinds of numinous concerns: indeed, he is aware and openly critical of the kind of "scientific fanaticism" that can fester in certain systems (and he has Communism specifically in mind here) when a certain platform of unquestionable assumptions becomes enshrined in a kind of modernist orthodoxy, and how this defect -- despite its "scientific" methodological consistency -- can in fact destroy the very basis for the curiosity of science itself.³¹ Isaac -- for his part -- might point to this as an example of how the demons can interject deception and confusion when there is no deliberate intentional pattern of return to the noetic light, when our eyes are fixed exclusively upon physical and psychical realities.

Polanyi's solution to the knowing problems of the modern world begins with a reimagination of the structures of knowing -- scientific knowing in particular, but also artistic knowing -- as communal tradition and embodied process. We might describe his vision as verging on the "ascetical." Polanyi is concerned to identify the same kind of noetic light and connect us to it as knowers, but he reflects more upon its innate aspect within human intelligence through the metaphorical elision of the structures of emergence and of tacit knowledge, which I read as an attempt at the horizontal rendering of a fundamentally vertical source and transmission.

There is an advantage then, I believe, to the rediscovery and rehabilitation of the "ascetical

²⁹ The famous Stoic concern for this, tracing back to Zeno, being preserved by Cicero in *De natura deorum academica* II.145.

³⁰ Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 168.

³¹ Cf. for instance *The Tacit Dimension*, 86.

genius” as exemplified by someone like Isaac the Syrian. Such “genius” provides us with a language and practice to explore the middle space between the artistic and the scientific in an explicit way, offering an imaginal map of this vertical region wherein the content and construction of this “tacit” space can be symbolically navigated. Polanyi, meanwhile, makes an excellent companion for the study of the ascetical genius and the religious imitation of its contents, since Polanyi reminds us that the ascetical mode of knowing -- as much as it is directed towards and oriented by that which is from “on high” -- itself still inhabits the structures of human knowledge and experience. Appreciating the ascetical genius, therefore, requires more than a simple, dead repetition of received doctrines and practices, but the assimilation of its standpoints and commitments, and the existential devotion to the realization of the hidden potentialities of its secret wisdom. These are the kinds of practices that not only serve to enable a “religion” to be fruitful, but also, in opening a pathway to the authentically “religious,” deepens the fecundity of the entire cultural enterprise in its living, doing, and knowing aspects.