

Everyone a Sailor: Oakeshott's Affinity for the Polanyian Vision of Human Activity

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ABSTRACT

Among the most prominent reviewers of Polanyi's Personal Knowledge, certainly in England, is Michael Oakeshott. The critical features of his review are well known. Less often noted is Oakeshott's overall approval of the book as well as his considerable enthusiasm for it. What accounts for this positive appraisal?

The thesis of this study is that Oakeshott is attracted to Polanyi's magnum opus due to an affinity for its portrayal of the human condition of which he is not fully and explicitly aware. Although Oakeshott is a skeptical idealist and Polanyi a hopeful realist, their positions converge in regard to justification. In fundamental respects, Polanyi and Oakeshott are in concert.

Oakeshott is sometimes alleged to be a moral relativist. Polanyi scholars understand that he at times has been similarly accused. In Personal Knowledge, Polanyi responds effectively to this accusation. Because Oakeshott on relevant matters agrees with Polanyi, he is immune to the charge of relativism as well. While Oakeshott offers his own defense against this indictment, he is drawn to Polanyi because he tacitly grasps that, in Polanyi's personalist expansion and enrichment of the concept of experience, there is a deeper and thereby more effectual response to the charge. In sum, if Oakeshott is a moral relativist, so too is Polanyi. But Polanyi is not, and, for the very reason we say this, neither is Oakeshott. The inclination to assert the opposite, in addition to maligning Oakeshott, comes at the cost of overlooking Polanyi's primary contribution to intellectual history.

Everything actually in experience is already infected with the possibility of being unsatisfactory, and yet nothing save what is in experience can serve as a criterion for experience. —Michael Oakeshott¹

Soon after its publication in 1958, Michael Oakeshott wrote a thoughtful review of Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*. Immediately capturing the reader's attention is Oakeshott's criticism of Polanyi: that his writing is "disordered, repetitive, digressive, and often obscure," that his propensity to cover too much ground "makes the book like a jungle through which the reader must hack his way," and that, due to deficient "scepticism" (Oakeshott's hallmark), there is reason to suspect "philosophical innocence."² But equally notable is the review's overall (if standoffish) approval and cautious respect for the book. That the arguably premier British political philosopher of the twentieth century should be sufficiently interested in Polanyi to read and review this long and difficult volume, and then register his regard for it, is noteworthy and provocative. Students of Polanyi as well as Oakeshott are understandably curious to know more about what lies behind this perhaps puzzling fact.

There is an additional reason to investigate. As we explore what scholars familiar with Polanyi have written about Oakeshott, we find the accusation of moral relativism. This too is a curious fact: could it be that Oakeshott's amicable disposition toward *Personal Knowledge* is the consequence of his finding in the book useful support for a relativistic account of moral life? Interestingly, Oakeshott in his review of *Personal Knowledge* comments on the "dilemma" posed for Polanyi by his emphasis on the personal: how can Polanyi authoritatively establish the place of the personal in scientific and other modes of knowing without falling into subjectivism? Oakeshott, after noting that Polanyi labors mightily to maintain a sharp distinction between the personal and the subjective, remains uncertain that Polanyi in doing so proves successful. Oakeshott, however, is not the moral relativist he sometimes is alleged to be. Rather, he contends that, while moral guidance not defined through and bound by tradition (human practices) is a chimera, relativism in moral life is not a necessary consequence. And Polanyi would agree. It will be necessary in what follows to show that Oakeshott has in Polanyi an ally whose rejection of subjectivism and an affiliated moral relativism is stouter than it might initially appear. Oakeshott's not unfriendly reception of *Personal Knowledge* is the result of an affinity with Polanyi of which he seems not entirely aware.

In carrying out our project, we will, after a brief introduction, proceed in the following manner. First, drawing from a wide range of Oakeshott's writings, we will dwell on the key concepts through which he characterizes the human enterprise. Second, we will plumb in some detail aspects of Polanyi's thought that (1) arrest Oakeshott's attention and (2) ought to capture Oakeshott's attention but are not in the review mentioned by him. Guiding this investigation is the question of whether Oakeshott has read Polanyi accurately and comprehensively. Finally, in the third and final section, we will see that Polanyi is not a moral relativist and, for the very reasons we definitively affirm this, neither is Oakeshott. Oakeshott is drawn to *Personal Knowledge* precisely because the book offers substantial support for the conception of human activity and political life that he has outlined and defended over the course of a long career.

Introduction: "Oakeshott's Moral Relativism"

Students of Michael Polanyi have had occasion to study Michael Oakeshott. Walter Mead, a noted Polanyian scholar, in 2004 sought to clarify the importance of Oakeshott for those seeking to strengthen their understanding of Polanyi.³ In what will strike readers sympathetic to Oakeshott as a brutally harsh assessment, Mead opens his essay with the assertion that Oakeshott "offers an understanding of values as essentially relative—the circumstantial 'prejudices' of tradition, denies any meaning to the concept of 'transcendence,' and advances an essentially Hobbesian/Humean perspective that human motivation is explainable in terms no loftier than the pursuit of 'desire,' 'delight,' and 'satisfaction.'" Later he adds, "Oakeshott understands moral values and meaning from a Hobbesian perspective. They are mere servants of the task appropriate to the world of practice.... The values of a society are relative to the circumstances of each particular society and usually the established traditions of a society will suffice for its moral compass."⁴ Earlier, in an essay not mentioned by Mead, Mark Mitchell stated that "Oakeshott's theory of knowledge does not seem able to avoid sliding into a form of moral relativism."⁵ Mitchell's argument begins by accurately noting that, for Oakeshott, there is no higher standard than coherence. He then adds, "coherence alone as a test for truth is inadequate."⁶ Strikingly, Mitchell in his defense at this point cites Polanyi: "Coherence as the criterion of truth is only a criterion of stability. It may equally stabilize an erroneous or a true view of the universe."⁷ A page later, Mitchell drives home his point: in the absence of a standard

superior to the coherence of individual traditions, “there is no way to evaluate which of two stable moral traditions is preferable,” and “we are left with, at best, a relativism between apparently stable traditions.”⁸ Of considerable importance, and setting the stage for much of the analysis that occurs later in this study, is the fact that Mitchell, when he returned to Oakeshott in a book-length study just five years ago, observes that the allegation that Oakeshott’s denial of a transcendent moral authority (that would trump mere coherence) entails moral relativism between traditions “simply miss[es] Oakeshott’s point.”⁹ A fair and penetrating grasp of Oakeshott’s account of human activity, he now asserts, shows that on Oakeshott’s premises it is senseless to posit the bar in whose absence moral relativism supposedly ensues. “Thus,” he writes, “the question of relativism *between* traditions is simply not a relevant question for Oakeshott.”¹⁰ The emphasis on “between,” however, is of course significant. Mitchell posits that Oakeshott’s understanding of a tradition, beyond which there is no appeal, allows for conflicting, equally authoritative moral “intimations,” and thus concludes that relativism *within* traditions appears inescapable. A primary burden of the analysis that follows is to demonstrate that being bound by tradition no more entails moral relativism within traditions than it does moral relativism between them. In doing so, Polanyi’s insight will prove of considerable value to Oakeshott.

Oakeshott’s Conception of the Human Enterprise

In the endeavor to show that Oakeshott is not a moral relativist and that Polanyi has an important role to play, we unavoidably enter deeply into Oakeshott’s complex yet fascinating account of the human enterprise. This account exercises a controlling background influence in everything Oakeshott writes throughout a lengthy and prolific career. But it is elaborated explicitly and forthrightly in 1933 by the remarkably young Oakeshott in *Experience and Its Modes*.¹¹ In the summary that follows, we will draw on *Experience and Its Modes* as well as the subsequent extensions of these early premises that appear in the many essays published since then. Throughout his writings, Oakeshott speaks in what he calls in that work a “voice.” A central principle of Oakeshott’s account is that a voice is defined, and necessarily expressed, by an “idiom.” As he will say in 1975, “We must defend our position with reasons appropriate to it.”¹² Thus, Oakeshott will employ an idiom as he outlines the central role played by idiom (and hence voice) in the human enterprise. There is, then, in Oakeshott a performative consistency reminiscent of that which characterizes the heart of Polanyi’s intellectual edifice (especially as it is fully explicated in *Personal Knowledge*). This fact will prove significant indeed. For present purposes, however, the important point is that the appropriate manner for approaching Oakeshott’s thought is through examination of the idiom (i.e., the central concepts) he uses to express himself. To that task we now turn.

Relevant Key Principles from Experience and Its Modes

Experience and Its Modes, though intended to be a clear and precise account of human experience, will, ironically, strike most readers as strange and abstract. Oakeshott likely would attribute this reaction to the fact that so many of us are in the grip of powerful misunderstandings and thus, in our confusion, predictably face difficulty in seeing the truth. Be that as it may, we need a concise, accurate account of the central argument of this challenging book, and we are in the debt of Neal Wood for providing such:

A fundamental unity exists between the subject and the object of perception. Between what is given in experience and what is achieved by the perceiver there is no divorce that would imply an external physical world as a fixed sensory datum. All perception is judgment, and all experience which arises from perception is thought. Experience, therefore, constitutes a given world of ideas which the individual attempts to make more of a world of ideas, *i.e.*, a more satisfactory and less irrational world of ideas. The criterion of reality, rationality, and truth is coherence and not correspondence. The degree to which our experience is rational and truthful depends upon the degree to which it is coherent. The essence of this coherence is the satisfaction resulting from the cohesive interrelations of our experience as a world of ideas.¹³

Moreover, as suggested by the title of the book, experience exists in “modes.” Oakeshott in this volume discusses three such modes: the historical, the scientific, and the practical. (There are others, including the poetic.) Each of the three modes is distinguished and fundamentally defined by its (system of) “postulates” (what we might label “presuppositions”) that, *viewed from the outside*, are, respectively, “the organization of the totality of experience *sub specie praeteritorum*”;¹⁴ absolute communicability and stability (which is to say, “under the category of quantity”);¹⁵ and orientation toward production or prevention of change (*i.e.*, subordination to willful goal-directed activity).¹⁶ Each mode of experience has, as its end, to achieve an ever-increasing degree of coherence in light, and under the influence, of its system of postulates.¹⁷ Moreover, due to the determinative influence of the system of postulates (each of the modes is “unassailable”—“so long as it is content to mind its own business” [254]), a critical thrust from one mode of experience toward another speaks past its target (there is no “direct relationship” between the modes) and thus the attempt to do so is flagrantly incoherent.¹⁸

We know from Wood’s summary of *Experience and Its Modes* that in the world as described by Oakeshott it is coherence, as opposed to correspondence, that is the criterion of reality, rationality, and truth. Oakeshott, however, concedes “the plausibility and attractiveness of the view that in experience what is satisfactory is achieved only when the correspondence of a given world of ideas with some other world of ideas has been established” (*EM*, 30). We should pause to illuminate this statement, for in doing so we will encounter what Oakeshott has to say regarding the nature of knowledge.

Oakeshott attributes the plausibility of the erroneous correspondence position to “the confusion of a genetic standpoint with the standpoint of logic” (30). Many of us are misled by the fact that “genetically my world of experience has been built upon a foundation which, at times, I have taken to be absolute” (30). But this assumption is flawed: in none of the modes of experience is there a touchstone beyond doubt (*i.e.*, something that agreement with which is the mark of legitimate acceptance). Correspondence “certainly exists,” but it “is a genetical, and consequently a partial, defective, abstract representation of the character of experience [that] tells us something of the genesis of satisfaction, but nothing of the criterion of satisfaction in experience” (31). Granted, it is common for us to take an idea as absolute and then judge a candidate in terms of its correspondence, or lack thereof, with it. This sense of absoluteness, however, is a delusion. That with which the candidate is to correspond is never “established or fixed for more than a limited time or a specific purpose,” and, consequently, “the final satisfaction in experience can never lie in mere correspondence” (31). Rather, “[t]he only absolute in experience is a complete and unified world of ideas, and for experience to correspond with that is but to correspond with itself; and that is what I mean by coherence” (31).

This sets the stage for examination of the meaning of knowledge. Oakeshott begins by noting that it is commonly and naively believed that knowledge is the product of bringing into experience something that previously lay outside of experience (“the conversion of ‘things’ into ideas or facts” [31]). But for Oakeshott, the notion that something lies outside of experience is nonsense. In response to it, Oakeshott sets forth his alternative: “knowledge consists in whatever in experience we are obliged to accept, whatever in experience we are led to and find satisfaction in” (31). That which is the occasion for knowledge, then, is present in experience. And that which gives rise to the obligation out of which knowledge arises is the coherence of what is now experienced. He adds, “Whatever we know, we know as a whole and in its place in our whole world of experience. And knowledge as something apart from that which affords satisfaction in experience is an idle fancy” (31). Although Oakeshott does not in this context mention the matter, it is useful to note that the meaning of satisfaction (and thus the sense of obligation) is a function of a continuum of experience that precedes the advent of such knowledge and will in a somewhat more coherent form exist beyond it. The image of an active agent within context is further suggested by Oakeshott’s use of the phrase “*process* of knowledge” (31, emphasis added). Since “we know as a whole,” it is unsurprising to find Oakeshott stating that the growth of knowledge is not a “mere accretion” but rather a modification of a preexisting whole leading to a new whole: “a gain in knowledge is always the transformation and the recreation of an entire world of ideas. It is the creation of a new world by transforming a given world” (31).¹⁹

For Oakeshott there are two sorts of knowledge, namely, knowledge of direct acquaintance and knowledge about things (a fact recognized by some European languages—in French, for example, by *connaître* and *savoir*, respectively). Oakeshott warns, however, that the distinction, while genuine, is often taken too far. In the case of both, “[t]here is no knowledge of ‘things’ apart from concepts” and “[t]o see, to touch, to taste, to hear, to smell is, always and everywhere, to judge and to infer” (39). That is, knowledge of direct acquaintance is not immediate in the sense of dispensing with concepts and the judgment and inference involved therein. Both sorts of knowledge are of fact, the sole mode of what we know.

Given the distinction between the two sorts of knowledge, might we say that one or the other is defective or that one is superior to the other? One might, for example, allege that direct acquaintance afforded something essential that is absent in (mere) “knowing about.” Oakeshott responds by observing, “We ought not to confuse intensity of sensitive affection with adequacy of experience” (40). He then complicates the picture with this fascinating extended comment:

Knowledge about a thing cannot properly be said to be defective because it falls short of direct acquaintance. But there is another sense in which mere knowledge about things may be considered inadequate. It may mean knowledge which falls short of definition, and in that case it is certainly defective. But it is not an independent kind of knowledge; it is merely defective knowledge. And to make good its defects it does not require to become more direct or immediate, but more complete. Knowledge about things is, then, taken by itself, defective knowledge, but it is not defective because it fails to be direct knowledge. The knowledge of direct acquaintance, on the other hand, because it cannot mean immediate knowledge, seems to mean such knowledge as comes nearest to being immediate. But the peculiarity of this knowledge is the isolation and incoherence of its contents. Not that they are absolutely isolated or incoherent, for that is impossible. They are merely as isolated and incoherent as elements in a world of experience can be without falling outside that world. *Direct knowledge is not an independent*

kind of knowledge, it is a certain degree of knowledge. It is knowledge presented in the form of a world of ideas expressly characterized as *mine*. And I need scarcely urge that it is also a defective form of knowledge. And it is defective for the same reason as mere knowledge of things is defective; it is knowledge which falls short of definition. (*EM*, 40; first emphasis added)

Oakeshott's conclusion is that there is, strictly speaking, only one kind of knowledge and only one kind of experience, and it is only through such experience that we know reality. But the single sort of knowledge exists in degrees. Oakeshott is willing to entertain the possibility that these degrees are a measure of the explicitness (or implicitness) in the judgment of which knowledge consists, where explicitness or implicitness is a function of the completeness or coherence (i.e., the "definition") of the knowing in question. *This* accounts for the apparent two sorts of knowledge.²⁰ And if knowledge can be more or less explicit or implicit, this would seem to be true of experience as well.²¹

So what for Oakeshott is truth? What is the measure of objectivity? The answer to the first of these questions has the following preface: "A truth which is or may be outside of knowledge is no less arbitrary and has no more meaning than an unknowable which is inside reality" (36–37).²² Truth and knowledge are "inseparable." And all knowledge of course comes through experience. Indeed, "Whatever is satisfactory in experience is true, and it is true because it is satisfactory" (37). Oakeshott then states, "Nothing save what is true can...be known. Truth is a correlative of experience. Without experience there can be no truth; without truth there can be no experience" (37). But that which is satisfactory in experience, and what in fact constitutes experience, is coherence. So, for Oakeshott, truth is the result of the achievement of coherence: "a world of ideas is true when it is coherent and because it is coherent" (37). And, lest the temptation to allege correspondence as the measure of truth is even by now not altogether exorcised, Oakeshott adds, "there is no external means by which truth can be established; the only evidence of truth is self-evidence. *Veritas nullo eget signo*" (37).²³

What, then, is objectivity? Oakeshott begins by forcefully separating himself from the widespread and influential view that the objective consists of that which is uncontaminated by consciousness. This for Oakeshott is nonsensical. As we have seen, to be known is to be within experience, and experience necessarily exists for someone, i.e., for a subject.²⁴ There is no existence outside of experience. Oakeshott could scarcely be more forthright: "An event independent of experience, 'objective' in the sense of being untouched by thought or judgment, would be an unknowable; it would be neither fact nor true nor false, but a nonentity" (71). But if freedom from the alleged contamination of consciousness is not the measure of objectivity, what is? The answer resides in what we have already learned about Oakeshott's position: the objective is whatever in experience we are obliged to accept, and the mark of the obligatory is coherence. Although all knowledge is experience, not all experience is equally satisfactory. "Objectivity" is the label appropriately employed for experience that is markedly coherent, i.e., experience that is so complete that its authority is conscientiously undeniable.²⁵ Oakeshott, it would appear, ranks among those figures (both St. Augustine and C. S. Lewis come to mind) for whom the known is a function of personal character and that of which it consists.

Finally, what within Oakeshott's schema is verification? Given what we have so far seen, we would in response expect a reference to coherence. We are not disappointed. Within his penetrating account of science (and, significantly, reminding us of Polanyi), Oakeshott states that "Experiment...is never a process of verification, in the sense of the reference of an idea to an 'objective', 'physical' world, because observations have not (and are never in practice held to

have) an absolute, validating authority of this kind” (153). Pointing in a very different direction, Oakeshott then adds, “The verification of an hypothesis is a matter solely of ascertaining how far it is coherent with the entire world of scientific ideas, the world conceived under the category of quantity” (153). Two elements of this statement are especially noteworthy. First, science, as does any of the modes of experience, operates under the influence of, and within the world defined by, its postulates (in its case, the category of quantity). Second, any instance of verification takes place within the existing dimensions of the larger enterprise of which it is a part. The actor within such an enterprise has no choice but to employ the instruments and practices afforded by that enterprise, and whatever such an actor offers in the way of knowledge or truth is subject to the authoritative assessment of the world out of which he arose and to which through such activity he aspires to contribute. To employ an image that will soon command our attention, verification in its entirety takes place “on the ship at sea.” For Oakeshott it is inconceivable that it could occur anywhere else.

Some Important Implications

We have in this summary of *Experience and Its Modes* barely tapped the rich complexity and comprehensiveness of Oakeshott’s account of the human enterprise. Let us further illuminate Oakeshott’s thought by exploring central elements of his philosophical anthropology that were implied in this early analysis and then straightforwardly set forth in key essays published decades later. We will do so under five headings: educational dimensions; human self-reliance; contingency and denial of teleology; the mature response to the human condition; and the human prospect.

There is good reason why Oakeshott wrote extensively on education. In an address from 1974, he states, “[The] inseparability of learning and being human is central to our understanding of ourselves. It means that *none of us is born human; each is what he learns to become* . . . [and] the important differences between human beings are differences in respect of what they have actually learned.”²⁶ This claim about human nature is further elaborated by a statement from a somewhat earlier essay: “Human beings are what they understand themselves to be; they are composed *entirely* of beliefs about themselves and about the world they inhabit.”²⁷ Consequences of the first order follow.

Let us begin by examining what is meant by saying that each of us is what he or she learns to become. In explaining the significance of early formation, Oakeshott employs the metaphor of the mirror. The school, and the culture generally, by acquainting the individual with a range of possibilities (actual events and actions as well as imaginary ones), forms an identity in terms of which a person understands oneself, other beings, and the surrounding world. This “inheritance of human understandings,” conveyed and established by educational activity (by which in modern societies we largely, if not primarily, mean schooling), “is the mirror before which [the individual] enacts his own version of a human life.”²⁸ This “mirror” is what we imagine the world and ourselves are and can possibly be. Ultimately responsible for what we believe and thus what we do, this picture is the product of initiation via stories, broadly understood.²⁹ This is made possible by the fact that human beings “inhabit a world of intelligibles, that is, a world composed, not of physical objects, but of occurrences which have meanings....”³⁰ The most important elements of this initiation are transmitted tacitly, as we see in the learning of one’s native language: “When it is said that a child should learn a foreign language as he learns his native language, ‘by hearing it spoken’, what is being overlooked is that in the educational

engagement of ‘School’ what he learns of his native language is primarily what never could be learned by ‘hearing it spoken’.”³¹

Oakeshott is reminding us that any number of human outcomes are in principle possible, but what in fact emerges, individually and hence socially and culturally, is a function of the imagination cultivated through educational activity, i.e., of an intelligible world as we understand it to be. “A human life is composed of performances, choices to do *this* rather than *that* in relation to imagined and wished-for outcomes and governed by beliefs, opinions, understandings, practices, procedures, rules and recognitions of desirabilities and undesirabilities....”³² If, then, we genuinely care about what our fellow citizens believe and how they act, and about the civil consequences thereof, it is incumbent to attend carefully to what the young see and hear and thus come to understand. Conversely, if little or no mind is paid to these matters or (even more alarming) if the activity of cultivating the imagination and forming the understanding of the young has been seized by subversive elements, one ought not to be surprised by the disturbing, possibly world-erasing, result.

Education as envisioned by Oakeshott is “learning to perform humanly.”³³ Of course, what constitutes “humanly” is, while traditionally defined, in the eye of the beholder. The success (or failure) of education (a transaction between generations designed to effect inheritance) is a judgment executed by an observer who is the product of that inheritance. Under healthy circumstances, the choices made by members of later generations will be instances of self-disclosure and self-enactment understood and respected by the authority of earlier generations. Principled behavior follows from a disposition that is itself the product of a particular sort of rearing, that is, of initiation into a tradition conveyed via illustrations and exemplars that in their appeal and repugnance inform the imagination. It is because the stakes are so high, and because the chain of inheritance, once broken, may be lost forever, that Oakeshott refers to the alarming prospect of “the abolition of man” (a phrase we must believe was borrowed from C. S. Lewis).³⁴ In this connection, Oakeshott refers to contemporary efforts to reform schooling through focusing on local and topical concerns as a “project to destroy education.” This is because such an initiative “is an enterprise for abolishing man, first by disinheriting him, and secondly by annihilating him.”³⁵

Oakeshott’s stark assertion that human beings “are composed *entirely* of beliefs about themselves and about the world they inhabit” sets the stage for discussion of our second topic: human self-reliance, a feature of human existence that for Oakeshott exists at two levels. The first of these is captured by Timothy Fuller when he notes that for Oakeshott “the scepticism of philosophical reflection emerge[s] as the means of eliciting openness to the possibilities of human existence as may be discovered by individuals on their own, not as laid down by him or anyone else.” Fuller labels this “[t]he responsibility of self-definition.”³⁶ We might call this self-reliance at the personal level. But there is as well a parallel at the anthropological level—for “man” understood generically. This is poetically suggested by Oakeshott when he states, “The starry heavens above us and the moral law within are alike human achievements.”³⁷ The matter is more powerfully and disturbingly expressed when he observes, “And nothing survives in the world which is not cared for by human beings.”³⁸ For Oakeshott humanity is on its own. There is no force or tendency in the universe that can be trusted to carry us along in a direction in which we would like to go. Should we cease to maintain the human edifice, it will decay and ultimately collapse, in the end leaving no trace behind. Because even the self is a human achievement, this vision is, if possible, more disturbing than that offered by C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*: “if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be.” We thus understand the emphasis in Oakeshott on our “*man-made* inheritance” that “contains everything to which

value may be attributed.”³⁹ In the ongoing struggle that defines being human-in-the-world, our resources consist solely of what was earlier achieved and survives for our use now. This inheritance is a treasure that is vital to our continuance both personally and collectively. The important work must be done by you and me, here and now, and such remains the case in perpetuity. It is folly, and indeed an offense to the majesty of the inheritance itself, to believe that anything above and beyond our own efforts, informed by those who came before, exists to guide and take care of us. We inhabit “a wholly human world.”⁴⁰

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to learn, third, that for Oakeshott the universe contains no trace of teleology (there is no implicit perfection unfolding over time) and, moreover, that human existence is altogether contingent (as individuals and as a species, we just happen to find ourselves here). Statements to this effect permeate the essays on education, given that the human self-reliance entailed by our accidental appearance in a world absent purpose issues in the sense of responsibility that is the occasion for systematic educational activity. But Oakeshott’s vision is most powerfully communicated in *On Human Conduct* where he states that each of us is an agent that

has a ‘history’, but no ‘nature’; [one] is what in conduct he becomes. This ‘history’ is not an evolutionary or teleological process. It is what [the agent] enacts for himself in a diurnal engagement, the unceasing articulation of which continues until he quits the diurnal scene. And although he may imagine an ‘ideal’ human character and may use this character to direct his self-enactments, there is no ultimate or perfect man hidden in the womb of time or prefigured in the characters who now walk the earth.⁴¹

Should we find this portrayal troubling, we can in compensation enjoy the comfort of knowing that the agent is free, within the intrinsic restrictions of contingent circumstances, to make of himself what he will. The most important aspect of such freedom is to more fully understand the world of which we are a part. Drawing on the inheritance that, also, just happens to be there, one can to a considerable extent turn circumstances in the direction of his own purposes.⁴²

Let us now, fourth, turn to Oakeshott’s conception of the mature response to the human condition. In *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott states that “[a] morality...is neither a system of general principles nor a code of rules, but a vernacular language.”⁴³ He then goes on to note that there is a “plurality” of such languages, a fact, he says, that many find intolerable and thus are prompted, in order to satisfy an appetite for “something more substantial,” to imagine and take comfort in a morality that allegedly is absolute (i.e., free from mere contingency). For Oakeshott, the various languages are not, as this maneuver suggests, variations on some discernible central eternal truth but instead just what they appear to be: independent contingent manners of thinking. Oakeshott then points to an alternative response to this plurality of languages: the plurality “will reassure the modest mortal with a self to disclose and a soul to make who needs a familiar and resourceful moral language...to do it in and who is disinclined to be unnerved because there are other languages to which he cannot readily relate his own.”⁴⁴ In this description, both “mortal” and “modest” are significant. Oakeshott offers a portrait of maturity in which human finitude (individual as well as collective) and the plurality of incommensurate understandings are recognized and, liberated from an urgent yet inappropriate desire for “something more substantial,” the individual nevertheless composedly and productively carries on.

Oakeshott's conception of intellectual and moral maturity is most effectively captured in a 1951 metaphor, the ship at sea, that is perhaps the most enduring and telling feature of his entire corpus.⁴⁵ He states,

In political activity...men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.

There are many significant features of this powerful image. To begin with, whatever an agent wishes to do, the only resources available reside on the ship. One resource not available is knowledge of one's destination. Moreover, the agent lacks any sense of the ship's origin.⁴⁶ The ship and our being on it just happen to be the case. In short, the end and the beginning in any ultimate sense, being delusional, is simply irrelevant. What those on the ship *do* know (the clear-minded ones, at least) is that their immediate and ongoing responsibility is, perpetually, to keep the ship afloat. There are no guarantees. In the face of this uncompromising condition, a variety of responses is possible. One of these is to deny the truth through affiliation with unreal conceptions of meaning, direction, and purpose (that are, of course, ironically the product of what is already present on the ship). A more useful and mature response is to acknowledge our predicament, assess the challenges, inventory our resources, and take appropriate action. Appreciating the vital importance of existing assets, we will institute measures to preserve them for use in a future whose character must ever remain largely unknown. In addition, properly prepared members of the crew will enjoy not only the confidence arising from knowing that the ship has up to now sailed a good long time but also the courage required to carry on indefinitely in the future. Unlike their less astute, less candid, and less intrepid mates, they neither hide from the truth nor are paralyzed by it. Always at the ready to keep the ship afloat, they realize that the essential element in doing so is preserving the beliefs and practices that have secured our survival thus far by arranging for sailors like themselves to be replicated through the initiation and apprenticeship of the young who follow.

We now arrive at the fifth of our themes: Oakeshott's view of the human prospect. Given what we have learned so far, the reader will perhaps have anticipated what we discover here. Among the most observant of Oakeshott scholars is Timothy Fuller, who, in the introduction to *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, states that for Oakeshott "[t]he human condition is a predicament, not an itinerary."⁴⁷ Fuller's statement is a reminder that to be human for Oakeshott is to be locked in an eternal struggle that is anything but a predictable excursion with a likely satisfying outcome. "Predicament" is in fact a characterization of the human condition found throughout Oakeshott's work. It often occurs in conjunction with kindred jarring terms as, for example, in this passage from "A Place of Learning" (1975): human life

is, in the first place, an adventure in which an individual consciousness confronts the world he inhabits, responds to what Henry James called 'the ordeal of consciousness', and thus enacts and discloses himself. This engagement is an adventure...[that] has no pre-ordained course to follow: with every thought and action a human being lets go a mooring and puts out to sea on a self-chosen but largely unforeseen course. It has no pre-ordained destination: there is no substantive perfect man or human life upon which he may model his conduct. It is

a predicament, not a journey. A human being is a ‘history’ and he makes this ‘history’ for himself out of his responses to the vicissitudes he encounters. The world he inhabits is composed not of ‘things’, but of occurrences, which he is aware of in terms of what they mean to him and to which he must respond in terms of what he understands them to be.⁴⁸

Again, the nautical metaphor is telling. Each of us, through no choice of one’s own, finds himself at sea with a consciousness he just happens to have that is coincidental with a responsibility that may through inebriation, delusion, or other mechanism be veiled but in fact cannot be escaped. As noted earlier, human life is an “ordeal” in which no particular outcome is fated and the individual in the final analysis is on his own. On the positive side of the ledger, it is possible for such experience to be an “adventure” that is exciting precisely for being unconstrained by the distraction of immediate destination. But there is no concealing the intrinsic loneliness and ongoing difficulty of the human condition. The one thing that is “in the cards” is a lack of certainty and the corresponding burden of self-definition. If one is fortunate—and this depends on assimilation of and transformation by the traditional treasures in principle available to all but historically fully appreciated by only the few—one in the process learns to be human (that is, to possess a traditionally esteemed character and identity). Such an outcome is a historic achievement that is not in any sense “in the nature of things.” With such, it is possible to experience momentary short respite from the ongoing struggle. But there is no prospect of permanent relief. And, in response to those tempted to lament this condition, Oakeshott would remind us that to characterize this condition as tragic would be a mistake, for in making such an assessment one necessarily posits a perfection alien to human experience and for which history offers no support.

Oakeshott’s Assessment of *Personal Knowledge*

There is much in common between Oakeshott’s portrayal of the human enterprise and what is set forth, over more than 400 pages, by Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*. Some of these common features are reported by Oakeshott in his review of the book. Oddly, however, most of them, including elements central to Oakeshott’s account, are not. These will occupy our attention in the sections that follow.

Frequent readers of Oakeshott are accustomed to, and likely enjoy, an amused authorial detachment that often grows into subtle, if sometimes biting, criticism. The review is markedly reportorial in its detachment, and thus we suspect there exists more or less veiled censure as well. As we shall see, Marjorie Grene, finding this to be the case, vents considerable ire in a subsequent amendment to and correction of Oakeshott’s analysis.

Let us begin with a survey of those aspects of Polanyi’s book that are noted by Oakeshott and, in light of what we have come to understand about his conception of the human condition, we know are embraced by him too. This begins with Oakeshott’s observation that, for Polanyi, human beings are creatures-in-the-world who experience a “drive” to be at home there that is manifested, above all, in an urge to intellectually understand their condition. Oakeshott accurately adds that for Polanyi the sense of satisfaction accompanying one’s claim to know is necessarily connected to the degree of assent to it (ideally, universal) that we experience on the part of others. We are reminded of Polanyi’s insightful discussion of “the persuasive passion”⁴⁹ and his startling observation that, in the conflict between incommensurable frameworks of thought, competitors “are contesting each other’s mental existence.”⁵⁰ Oakeshott thus finds in

Polanyi recognition of what he has earlier established on his own: to be alive is to exist in situated struggle; moreover, differences in understanding sometimes go all the way down, and while there are resources capable of resolving conflict, none of these is itself an authority independent of framework.

Oakeshott goes on to summarize, again quite accurately, the heart of what, on the surface, is Polanyi's argument. The reigning conception of science (among philosophers, at least) is bogus. It is not true that scientists aim for unalloyed objectivity by rigorously rinsing their activity of any trace of personal passion and moral judgment. Detachment in this sense is an illusion that, if it were in fact realized, would destroy science. Oakeshott then leads us through Polanyi's insider's correction of the bogus characterization: (1) the empiricist conception of science is false: discovery does not begin with observation but instead with illumination, and hypotheses are not routinely jettisoned in the face of alleged falsification; (2) scientists are typically characterized by moral conviction, not neutrality; and (3) the "personal" plays an essential role in scientific knowing (and, indeed, in knowledge of all sorts). Oakeshott is impressed with Polanyi's "relentless" (might we say "personal"?) assault on empiricism—the object of which is "annihilation" of the foe. But, again, all of this is conveyed as a report that we must suspect is propelled by an implicit amused irony.

At the core of the review, and not so susceptible to the suspicion of ironic amusement, is Oakeshott's paraphrasing of Polanyi's account of science as an ongoing *activity* of discovering—an activity characterized by a consensus that is perpetually under modification and therefore in the making. Scientists, too, are situated. In their activity they respond to the professional conditions within which they find themselves, and through this activity they continually alter the conditions within which they, and other practitioners, must later operate. It is true that at any given time scientists are bound by authoritative rules and principles. But these are always personally interpreted and understood. Sometimes they are conscientiously overlooked or even overruled. During myriad decisions, scientists bring to bear a wide range of commitments, themselves the product of training, apprenticeship, and other forms of character formation. The activity of the scientist is a function of the sort of person he or she is. Much of what is responsible for this behavior is not readily apparent, not even to the practitioner in question. Oakeshott notes that for these reasons belief and trust (that is, submission to standards, explicit and otherwise) are, for Polanyi, at the heart of science. This is a far cry from the bogus empiricist conception in which "doubt and distrust" are central.

Echoing Polanyi, Oakeshott therefore emphasizes the "personal coefficient" in science. But Oakeshott is even more impressed by what Polanyi refers to as the "civic coefficient." Given what we know about Oakeshott, we cannot be surprised by this. By "civic coefficient," Polanyi is referring to the surrounding social and political conditions that are required if science is to be supported and thrive. Viable science is the fruit of allegiance to principles and ideals the pursuit of which defines the enterprise and makes it possible. If these principles and ideals are not respected within the larger social and political context—a respect manifested by educational measures, both explicit and implicit, that secure their authority over time—then science will be impeded and perhaps thwarted altogether. This brings to mind the dismal fate of genetics in Soviet Russia (though, as pressure on science in our own time to avoid "disparate outcomes"—in which the racial and sexual profile of the professoriate trumps application of professional standards—demonstrates, old-school Marxism is scarcely the only source of such destruction). This reminder of the fragility of traditional activity, and of the need, if it is to survive, for unceasing attention to its educational prerequisites, is perfectly Oakeshottian. As we shall see,

whatever for Grene may be the shortcomings of Oakeshott's review of *Personal Knowledge*, he accurately recognizes Polanyi's corrective to a fanciful rationalist conception of science.

While we therefore detect in Oakeshott's summary of *Personal Knowledge* considerable sympathy for Polanyi's remedial account of science, he nevertheless remains guarded and cautious in approval and, in his reluctance straightforwardly to endorse the book, even goes so far as to suggest that Polanyi suffers from "philosophical innocence." This judgement alone would have sparked a response by Marjorie Grene. But considerably more, as we shall see, sticks in her craw.

Grene's Response to Oakeshott

Grene's response to Oakeshott's review, in its clarification of the contribution made by *Personal Knowledge*, is itself a philosophical statement of the first order. She begins by noting that the book, despite Oakeshott's evident doubts on this score, does offer a theory of scientific knowledge. Indeed, in doing so, *Personal Knowledge* constitutes one of the three primary twentieth-century responses to Descartes and the critical tradition.⁵¹ Oakeshott's greatest failing is not to recognize that Polanyi's central concern in the book is *justification* (justification of the knowledge, now shown by Polanyi to be "personal," claimed by scientist and philosopher alike). What Oakeshott believes is problematic—viz., Polanyi's claim to have rescued the "personal" from the taint of subjectivity (see the introduction above)—is in fact a monumental achievement. In short, Oakeshott is singularly blind to the significance of what lies before him. It would seem that it is he, not Polanyi, who suffers from philosophical innocence.

But Grene's critique pierces even more deeply: although Oakeshott prominently displays the banner of skepticism, Polanyi is the superior skeptic. What Grene means by this assertion is that Polanyi's ingenious response to the critical tradition proceeds from the acknowledgement that all claims to knowledge, even personal knowing itself *and the corresponding philosophical position*, are dubious. And yet, for Polanyi, we can and should carry on. Justification remains possible. In fact, the distinctive manner in which Polanyi secures a performatively consistent (albeit circular) rational justification via reference to the concept of *commitment* is the philosophical heart of *Personal Knowledge*. Polanyi shows us a positive post-critical path out of the ruins of Descartes and the corresponding hitherto supremely victorious critical tradition.

Of lesser significance, but still important, are several other observations offered by Grene. She notes, for example, that despite the magnitude of Polanyi's achievement, he remains fundamentally modest. That is, Polanyi recognizes that the justification of knowledge is never finally secure. Rather, "the freedom won in the concept of commitment is a Faustian freedom, to be earned only by daily winning it again."⁵² Achieving (which is to say, maintaining) a justifiable rational order is an eternal challenge. Grene adds that Polanyi's focus on the personal nature of such struggle, indicated by his use of the first-person pronoun throughout *Personal Knowledge*, is a reminder of an ultimately lonely inner intensity, redolent of Kierkegaard's *Unscientific Postscript*, that, due to Oakeshott's inclination toward the Hegelian "concrete universal," is insufficiently appreciated by him.

Moreover, not explicitly noted by Grene but implied by what she does say, there are two additional points. With Oakeshott's pronounced emphasis on the human "predicament," the eternal challenge to establish rational justification is an aspect of Polanyi's account that should be well understood by Oakeshott. Further, and above all, it is Oakeshott, *the philosopher of experience*, who should recognize the significant amendment to the meaning of experience, as well as to the associated concept of reality, that is resident in Polanyi's fruitfully elaborated

notion of the “personal.” This personalist expansion of Oakeshott’s vision is a central theme in what is to follow.

The Oakeshottian Character of the Polanyian Account

But much more remains to be said. Our earlier analysis of Oakeshott’s understanding of the human enterprise reveals numerous affinities between his views and *Personal Knowledge* that call for greater attention than is found in either Oakeshott’s review or Grene’s response to it. The first of these is the assertion that circularity in justification is unavoidable. Oakeshott, it will be recalled, emphasizes the role of the “postulate” (the fundamental presupposition) in each of the modes of experience. This postulate not only defines the particular endeavor. Due to its pervasive influence, it also establishes an insularity that makes any purported rational conflict between modes of experience an instance of *ignoratio elenchi*. Postulate governs conclusion, and there is no higher-order context within which competing postulates may be evaluated. The postulate, it would seem, is a commitment as opposed to a claim to knowledge subject to rational assessment. Whatever justification may be summoned to support a claim to know (necessarily within a mode of experience) ultimately refers to the postulate. That is, it is circular.

Compare this to what we find in *Personal Knowledge*. Paradoxically serving as the keystone to Polanyi’s entire project is the section of the book titled “The Fiduciary Programme.” Here, looking back on human history, Polanyi notes that “when the supernatural authority of laws, churches and sacred texts had waned or collapsed, man tried to avoid the emptiness of mere self-assertion by establishing over himself the authority of experience and reason” (265). But, as Polanyi illustrates through the metaphor of “the second apple” (268), this effort is now understood to have failed. He therefore asks, “What can we do?” His courageous and ruthlessly honest response illuminates his distinctive contribution to contemporary intellectual life noted by Grene:

I believe that to make this challenge is to answer it. For it voices our self-reliance in rejecting the credentials both of medieval dogmatism and modern positivism, and it asks our own intellectual powers, *lacking any fixed external criteria*, to say on what grounds truth can be asserted in the absence of such criteria. To the question, ‘Who convinces whom here?’ it answers simply, ‘I am trying to convince myself.’ (265; emphasis added)

He adds, “we must accredit our own judgment as the paramount arbiter of all our intellectual performances” and refers to this as our “ultimate self-reliance” (265). Later in the book Polanyi confesses that such self-reliance is essentially circular. Opening chapter 10 (“Commitment”), under the heading “Fundamental Beliefs,” Polanyi states the following:

‘I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.’ This sentence, summarizing my fiduciary programme, conveys my ultimate belief which I find myself holding. Its assertion must therefore prove consistent with its content by practising what it authorizes. This is indeed true. For in uttering this sentence I both say that I must commit myself by thought and speech, and do so at the same time. Any enquiry into our ultimate beliefs can be consistent only if it presupposes its own conclusions. It must be intentionally circular. (299)

He then adds,

The last statement is itself an instance of the kind of act which it licenses. For it stakes out the grounds of my discourse by relying essentially on the very grounds staked out; my confident admission of circularity being justified only by my conviction, that in so far as I express my utmost understanding of my intellectual responsibilities as my own personal belief, I may rest assured of having fulfilled the ultimate requirements of self-criticism, that indeed I am obliged to form such personal beliefs and can hold them in a responsible manner, even though I recognize that such a claim can have no other justification than such as it derives from being declared in the very terms which it endorses. Logically, the whole of my argument is but an elaboration of this circle: it is a systematic course in teaching myself to hold my own beliefs. (299)

It is a further indication of Polanyi's commitment to consistency that, in making these extraordinary statements, he speaks passionately in the first-person singular.

Polanyi, then, no less than Oakeshott, dispenses with any "external means by which truth can be established" (*EM*, 37). Yet the personal assessment outlined by Polanyi in their place is conscientious, and, in the name of conscience, one must take into consideration the claims to truth made by other persons (as well as what one already takes to be true—including, notably, the legitimacy of rule by conscience). The central role played by conscience in Polanyi's account reminds us of Oakeshott's definition of knowledge as "whatever in experience we are obliged to accept, whatever in experience we are led to and find satisfaction in" (*EM*, 31). In Oakeshott's terms, and as indicated in the epigraph to this study, a claim to truth succeeds only when it coheres in a satisfying manner with existing facts (which are the residue of prior and ongoing learning). Polanyi usefully illuminates the personal character of this process. It is important to note that "reality," correspondence with which some Polanyi scholars maintain is his criterion for truth, is no more external than is the authority of existing facts that is central to the coherence criterion advanced by Oakeshott. As we shall see, "reality" is as indigenous to Oakeshott's ship at sea as are the existing facts (ideas, actually) that are at the center of his account.

Readers of Polanyi will recall that *Personal Knowledge* is a sustained critique of a false but seductive ideal of objectivity. This is clear from the outset where Polanyi in the preface declares that "I start by rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment" and highlights instead "the *personal participation* of the knower in all acts of understanding" (vii). Yet "[c]omprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity" (vii). Objectivity is thus not abandoned by Polanyi but instead associated with both the aim and product of (personal) discovery, namely, "contact with a hidden reality, contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications" (vii–viii). It is this "fusion of the personal and the objective" that for Polanyi constitutes "Personal Knowledge" (viii).

As we saw earlier, Oakeshott also rejects a false ideal of objectivity. In opposition to the view that the objectively known is distinctively free of contamination by the knower, Oakeshott emphasizes that the objective arrives in the form of experience and experience presupposes a subject (i.e., consciousness).⁵³ Moreover, any instance of knowing (including the experience of objectivity) is the product of an (active) inference by a subject. As for Polanyi, passivity is alien

to knowing, and to eliminate this personal dimension would be to eliminate experience as well, along with whatever is meant by “objectivity.”

We also know from the earlier analysis of Oakeshott that for him the mark of objectivity is the degree of coherence present in such an experience. When one is “obligated” to accept an instance of experience as knowledge, this is due to the “satisfaction” associated with doing so. But the satisfaction is itself a function of appreciation of the coherence of the resulting unity, a unity consisting of a melding of the new experience with what was already understood to be the case. Could Polanyi possibly endorse this assertion? What of his forthright criticism of coherence as the criterion of truth that was cited by Mitchell?⁵⁴ We are required to probe more deeply.

Oakeshott’s account of objectivity, fact, and knowledge prompts us to recognize in *Personal Knowledge* two distinct conceptions of coherence. These are usefully labelled “coherence₁” and “coherence₂.” Among the most interesting features of the book is its analysis of the Azande people of Africa. Polanyi finds in them an extraordinary and telling instance of stability of belief. Routinely employing a variety of intellectual devices, the Azande sustain what the preponderant Western tradition understands to be a magical view of the world. They do so by deflecting any and all incursion upon it by rival conceptions. As a result, all new (ongoing) experience reinforces belief that is the product of prior experience. The Zande view of the world is coherent, and it functions effectively and persists because it is coherent. Yet Polanyi, after saluting the ingeniousness of Zande culture and its constituent practices, in the name of truth straightforwardly rejects the resulting understanding. The Azande are wrong about the world. This is clear to Polanyi as a result of the clarity (the coherence) he enjoys due to his allegiance to the rival naturalistic framework.

The Azande offer an instance of coherence₁. What makes Polanyi’s rejection of the Zande framework possible is the influence of coherence₂. But the primary reason Polanyi cites the Azande is that their stability of belief so clearly illuminates the character of all comprehensive frameworks, *including the naturalistic framework*. In its parallel stability of belief, the naturalistic framework and the world it sustains is also an instance of coherence₁. What, then, is this coherence₂ that we are suggesting underlies Polanyi’s criticism of the Azande? And from what is it derived?

The answer is that coherence₂ is coherence₁ as it is exercised personally in the form of the ongoing inferences and judgments (including acts of knowing) that constitute one’s active being in the world. In his role as an epistemological theorist, Polanyi notes the variety of instances of coherence₁. (But even in doing this—in making, with the intention of universal validity, affirmations about the world—he is manifesting a commitment that betrays confident occupation of coherence₂.) Then, when Polanyi opts to speak conscientiously regarding what is in fact real and true, he must have recourse to his own knowledge and experience. Judging on the basis of coherence₂, he finds the Zande world terribly deficient.

When, therefore, Polanyi states that coherence is an inadequate criterion of truth, he is speaking as an observer of instances of coherence₁, and the missing factor responsible for this negative assessment is the difference between (theorizing about) coherence₁ and (personally affirming) coherence₂. Two important implications immediately follow. First, were coherence in both senses inadequate, to say so would be a case of performative contradiction. This is because the assertion of inadequacy rests on a judgement dependent on commitment to the coherent sustaining framework (made possible by coherence₂). In saying that coherence₁ is inadequate, Polanyi is necessarily simultaneously affirming that coherence₂ is not. Second, if all we recognize in Polanyi’s position is an assertion of the existence of multiple incommensurate frameworks (instances of coherence₁), we would justifiably view him as endorsing

epistemological relativism. But this is precisely the opposite of what Polanyi is saying. The Azande, asserts Polanyi, are wrong. So are innumerable other points of view. Polanyi's epistemology establishes the common features of all frameworks and then addresses the eminently practical question of "Okay, what now?" The answer is to recognize the necessity and legitimacy of conscientiously cultivating and embracing coherence₂. This consists of the ongoing principled accumulation (and revision) of knowledge. Knowing is a commitment, and it is always possible that in our claim to know we may be wrong. This hazard is unavoidable. But to be alive is to judge. And, in judging, we can rely on only the resources we find ourselves possessing. One should honor one's principles and act accordingly. But aiming to do even better, if this is not simply one of these principles, is a chimera.

There is, then, in regard to the centrality of coherence a strong affinity between Oakeshott and Polanyi. The coherence, and hence the influential power, of what one already knows makes possible the knowing of even more. But the same influence responsible for acceptance of one claimant to the truth is also responsible for the rejection of another. This constitutes the operation of conscience that is the very core of the central affirmation—"I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings"—that gives rise to *Personal Knowledge* (299).

The coherence₂ that we have discerned in Polanyi's personal knowing also underlies an affinity between Oakeshott and him regarding the meaning of verification. As we saw above, for Oakeshott verification depends, to begin with, on congruence with the underlying "postulate" (presupposition) and is said to exist to the degree that a proposed candidate for knowledge coheres with what is already known and understood. Verification for Oakeshott is not agreement between the candidate and something outside of experience. This suggestion is for him nonsensical, for nothing real is outside experience. Rather, "verified" is the honorific conferred on a candidate when it is understood to cohere₂ satisfactorily with what already is known to be the case. Note, now, what is said about verification by Polanyi: "Things are not labelled 'evidence' in nature, but are evidence only to the extent to which they are accepted as such by us as observers" (30).⁵⁵ Playing an indispensable role in such verification (and of course in discovery as well) are "the premisses of science," which serve as presuppositions that "exercise their guidance over the judgment of scientists" (165). In both cases, verification is the product of the conscientious judgment we have labelled "coherence₂."

More generally, it is coherence₂ that is responsible for the "satisfaction" that is central to objectivity and verification as these concepts are understood by both Oakeshott and Polanyi. Reference to satisfaction permeates the discussion of objectivity that opens *Personal Knowledge*. The Copernican heliocentric system, for example, on the basis of its objectivity supplanted the competing Ptolemaic conception because the measure of intellectual satisfaction moved from the evidence of the senses to the beauty of theoretical construct. In making the resulting claims regarding the planets and stars, scientists from Copernicus onward believe they are satisfying "an inherent quality deserving universal acceptance by rational creatures" (*PK*, 4). Even aliens from another galaxy should (and would) concur with our statements of astronomical fact "provided they share our intellectual values" (4). Intellectual satisfaction qua "apprehension of a rationality which commands our respect" (5) is, moreover, a clue to reality. Further, the legitimacy of earlier affirmations of fact is confirmed by the discoveries that follow from embracing those affirmations as true. But all that has been thereby achieved depended on conscientious obedience to the authority of the reigning criteria for intellectual satisfaction. This is the operation of coherence₁, which, by being affirmed and acted upon via commitment in the form of judgments regarding the universe, has become coherence₂. In Oakeshott's idiom, we are obligated, due to

the resulting satisfaction, to accept the relevant subsequent experiences as fact. The realm of the verifiable and objectively true thereby expands. The existing context is authoritative, but the content of that context (and hence the character of its authority) evolves through such expansion. The ship sails on.⁵⁶

Let us now return to the five implications of Oakeshott's philosophical anthropology that were our focus above. In what manner, if at all, do they establish an affinity between the thought of Oakeshott and Polanyi? The first of the implications concerned education, broadly understood. On Oakeshott's account, no one is born human, and each of us is what he learns to become. In this process, imagination is central: while in principle there exist for human character innumerable possibilities, it is in terms of the images that reside in the imagination that one in fact understands himself and elects to act (thus becoming who he is). The vehicle for the formation of imagination is stories in the broadest sense of the term, and their influence is largely tacit, i.e., one is influenced by a variety of factors, many of which we do not and, in many cases (due to the very nature of the formation taking place), cannot discern. Under healthy circumstances the process of encountering culturally sustaining authoritative illustrations of human possibilities and effecting their establishment in human imagination is systematic and only rarely avoided. The primary characteristic of a viable way of life (*politeia*) is that through measures both formal and informal it passes on a tradition and thereby secures through the cultivation of constituent individuals both agreement at a fundamental level and, as a result, its own preservation. When, through oversight, carelessness, or subversion, such formation fails to occur, we face "the abolition of man" and the corresponding political and moral decay.

Polanyi is well aware of these matters and responds expertly to them. This occurs explicitly and forcefully in *Science, Faith and Society*⁵⁷ as well as, more generally but no less effectively, in *Personal Knowledge*.⁵⁸ In the former, Polanyi states, "members admitted to a community at birth cannot be given a free choice of their premisses; they have to be educated in some terms or other, without consultation of any preference of their own."⁵⁹ Later, he adds,

I accept it moreover as inevitable that each of us must start his intellectual development by accepting uncritically a large number of traditional premisses of a particular kind; and that, however far we may advance thence by our own efforts, our progress will always remain restricted to a limited set of conclusions which is accessible from our original premisses.⁶⁰

Establishment of such "premisses" is the work of "primary education."⁶¹ Polanyi's understanding of the vital and indispensable role played by early authoritative initiation into a tradition is further elaborated in *Personal Knowledge*, where he states that "a free society accords both independent status and a theoretically unrestricted range to thought, though in practice it fosters a particular cultural tradition, and imposes a *public education* and a code of laws which uphold existing political and economic institutions" (*PK*, 214; emphasis added). There is of course in free society "a rivalry of opinions," but the fissiparous effect of such disputation is constrained by agreement on matters of fact—an agreement, giving rise to trust in others as well as in the deliberative process—that is itself the product of systematic initiation into a tradition (242). But trust and the associated viability of the civic order is a consequence of agreement on more than facts alone. Principled belief also plays a vital role, and for this reason a free society is "profoundly conservative":

The recognition granted in a free society to the independent growth of science, art and morality, involves a dedication of society to the fostering of a specific tradition of thought, transmitted and cultivated by a particular group of authoritative specialists, perpetuating themselves by co-option. To uphold the independence of thought implemented by such a society is to subscribe to a kind of orthodoxy which, though it specifies no fixed articles of faith, is virtually unassailable within the limits imposed on the process of innovation by the cultural leadership of a free society. (244)

On Polanyi's account, the various institutions of society—not only schools and universities but also churches, the courts, newspapers, political parties, etc., and, as a last resort, the police power—enforce such authority. Inevitably, Polanyi concedes, such arrangements perpetuate a degree of privilege and injustice. But, Polanyi warns, to undermine the existing imperfect (yet promising and ever-evolving) civic order in the name of establishing “absolute moral renewal” is, via the destruction of the fruitful product of centuries of constructive human endeavor, to open the door to something much worse than the existing shortcomings. As was seen in Bolshevik Russia, the supreme power required to eliminate imperfect arrangements counts among its myriad victims the reformist initiative itself.

The affinity between Oakeshott and Polanyi on the need for and features of such character formation extends to the inner dynamics of the process. Polanyi's “primary education,” like the formation described by Oakeshott, is largely a process of establishing presuppositions (Polanyi's “premisses”) in light of which individuals will throughout their lives understand themselves and the world. These typically are tacitly adopted through the influence of exemplars that reside at the center of stories, broadly conceived. And, as Oakeshott emphasized, it is not only through the force of illustrative actions and events that we are thereby shaped but also through the personal impact of the teacher or purveyor of the story. For Oakeshott and Polanyi alike, the moral imagination is the target of this educational activity. Residing therein are the authorities in terms of which one understands and thereby acts. Nothing could be of greater consequence for theorists concerned with reinforcing and preserving the precious heritage that is Western civilization.

The second of the implications of Oakeshott's philosophical anthropology concerned human self-reliance. Again, we discover a notable convergence of views. For Oakeshott, it will be recalled, humanity is on its own both individually (the responsibility of self-definition) and collectively (the responsibility of continuance and preservation). Should we cease to care, or should we care but fail to take appropriate measures, nothing beyond us will fill the gap in either domain. In this “wholly human world,” the perpetuation of value depends on our ongoing efforts, and, in the absence of those efforts, every trace of that which we esteem may be lost. The parallel account in *Personal Knowledge* grows out of Polanyi's conception of “calling.”⁶² For Polanyi, each of us through utter contingency just happens to appear in a particular time and place, heir to a history and tradition marked, above all, by principles and ideals to which one is free to commit oneself and thereby achieve personal meaning while simultaneously contributing to the sustaining tradition. It is, says Polanyi, his calling to do so: “Believing as I do in the justification of deliberate intellectual commitments, I accept these accidents of personal existence as the concrete opportunities for exercising our personal responsibility. *This acceptance is the sense of my calling*” (PK, 324). That to which each of us is heir and may through our submission serve as grounds for a meaningful existence is the potentially awe-inspiring assemblage of human achievement Polanyi labels “the noosphere” (388–389). The noosphere is itself contingent. Among human possibilities is wonder and humility in the face of this cultural heritage. But so

too is the chilling realization that, just as the noosphere (and with it all human meaning) might never have emerged, this fount is subject to effacement and even annihilation. At the center of Polanyi's conception of the human ideal is candid affirmation of this condition coupled with a resolve to take responsibility for perpetuating the circumstances that allow for recognition of and a positive response to the challenge posed therein. As is the case with Oakeshott, all that we esteem (including the capacity for such esteem) is a human achievement susceptible to permanent eclipse. The sole means to avoid this fate is initiation into the tradition of human achievement, which is to say, the preservative impact of education, broadly understood. Continuance of that which we prize (including the "man" of Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*) depends on our replicating in the generations that follow the very resolve to replicate that gives rise to this effort. There is no more important task and there is no one other than ourselves to perform it.

Such self-reliance set the stage for the third implication of Oakeshott's philosophical anthropology, namely, the absence of teleology. The universe, says Oakeshott, has no tendency to unfold in a preestablished direction: nothing is "in the cards." Rather, whatever purpose exists in the world is the product of humans. This vision appears incompatible with Polanyi's frequent reference to "ordering principles" according to which he understands the universe to be unfolding. There is, for example, an ordering principle that "*originated* life" (*PK*, 383), and an ordering principle is responsible for evolution (384). In light of such disparity, what affinity between the two can be discerned here?

In addressing this question, it is vital to recognize that Polanyi's ordering principles, while an essential feature of the universe, do not necessarily unfold. On Polanyi's account, whether or not an ordering principle is triggered is a matter of chance, as is its continuing operation. He states, for example, that "evolution, like life itself, will then be said to have been *originated* by the *action* of the ordering principle, an action *released* by random fluctuations and *sustained* by fortunate *environmental conditions*" (384; cf. 386). The unfolding, then, is contingent on circumstances that in and of themselves are without direction or purpose. If the result of the triggering is "teleological," it is so in other than the normal sense of the term, for the unfolding is neither guaranteed nor inevitable (though, interestingly, it is, qua a possibility, in the nature of things). Since the appearance of humans and the existence of all things human are the products of an ordering principle, then—for Polanyi as for Oakeshott—whatever sense of purpose there may be to the universe arises from a process that might not have occurred. And what of such purpose itself? Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the grand "spectacle" (389, 401, 402) or "epic process" (389) that constitutes Polanyi's portrayal of human emergence is that the discoverable purpose of all that has taken place is *provided by humans* through an act of understanding. Through faith and submission, humanity, in its ever-increasing grasp of the real, recognizes an emerging order and the principles responsible for it. Through sustained commitment, we are able more and more to know the truth. In opposition to the standard conception of teleology, under Polanyi's vision whatever purpose or meaning may be gleaned in the world is the fruit of human responsibility (viz., of passionate belief) in the absence of which there is no sense at all. It is in this respect that Polanyi can be said to join Oakeshott in affirming the absence of teleology.⁶³

The fourth implication of Oakeshott's philosophical anthropology is his conception of the mature response to the human condition. That condition was captured for Oakeshott by the metaphor of the ship at sea, a vessel without discernible origin or destination on which we happen to find ourselves along with other members of the crew, for whom the central task is to stay afloat while making the most of our circumstances. In doing so there are no resources other

than those found on the ship. Anything beyond that is inconceivable. The mature response to this fact is to cultivate and exercise a courageous modesty that eschews any expectation of external authority and thus transcends any corresponding bitterness or disappointment (and the impulse to take refuge in an illusory absolute). The finite and contingent language and practices that constitute the cultural heritage of an indeterminate interval of prior sailing are sufficient for meeting our ongoing responsibilities. The primary such responsibility is to secure replication, in future generations of sailors, of the candor, sobriety, and resourcefulness exercised by the existing crew in ensuring that replication. The result is the maturity necessary to preserve the capacity to realistically assess and productively accommodate whatever comes our way and thereby not only survive but thrive.

In the midst of the long chapter in *Personal Knowledge* titled “Intellectual Passions,” Polanyi makes a startling statement: “So I could properly profess that the scientific values upheld by the tradition of modern science are eternal, even though I feared that they might soon be lost for ever” (184).⁶⁴ Nothing is more important to Polanyi, and nothing more commands his respect, than these “values.” Yet he concedes that the world made possible by commitment to them—a world consisting not only of science but of principled existence generally—is susceptible to eternal eclipse! How, for Polanyi, ought one to respond to such a possibility?

The response advanced by Polanyi to this deeply disturbing feature of human existence is “balance of mind,” a condition several times mentioned in *Personal Knowledge* and a topic that has been examined in detail elsewhere.⁶⁵ A clue to the character of this “balance” is provided by one of the many revealing confessional statements that permeate the book: “The principal purpose of [*Personal Knowledge*] is to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false” (214). Significantly, Polanyi earlier in the book refers to “the final conception of truth within which I shall seek to establish my balance of mind” (104). The sought-after balance, then, grows out of and is dependent on a proper grasp of what it is to be true. What this means is clarified by an even earlier passage: “The ideal of an impersonally detached truth would have to be reinterpreted, to allow for the inherently personal character of the act by which truth is declared. The hope of achieving an acceptable balance of mind in this respect will guide the subsequent inquiry throughout...this book” (71). Polanyi’s balanced mind, that is to say, is characterized above all by liberation from an appetite for indubitable *foundations* that is married to a corresponding capacity to pursue and arrive at the truth on the basis of *grounds* that are inherently personal. In Polanyi’s terms, “*truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it*” (305). Or, as Polanyi says elsewhere in *Personal Knowledge*, he has “redefined the word ‘true’ as expressing the asseveration of the sentence to which it refers” (255). Belief is corrigible, and thus anything alleged to be true conceivably may be false. But the mature mind requires nothing more compelling than this and understands that the principles and ideals we hold most dear (including “scientific values”) remain authoritatively in place so long as their truth can be conscientiously affirmed (i.e., believed) with universal intent (by which Polanyi means they are advanced with the understanding that they are incumbent on all rational beings and will be recognized as legitimate by any imaginable rational being).

The balance of mind that is Polanyi’s mature response to an honest assessment of the human condition is, therefore, the product of (1) purging the presupposition that objectively compelling foundations for truth are possible or necessary and (2) developing, in its place, the capacity to envision truth as belief affirmed with universal intent. Such capacity rests on faith, manifested as commitment, coupled to the ability and willingness to submit “to the compelling claims of what in good conscience I conceive to be true” (65), i.e., to “the voice by which [one] commands

himself to satisfy his intellectual standards” (380). The balanced mind consists of the conscious and deliberate holding of beliefs that we acknowledge are, in the final analysis, unproven (and unprovable)—even when we understand that what we believe (“standards believed to be universal” [379]) may someday be lost forever. The balanced mind has faith in faith and is committed to commitment. It represents self-reliance buoyed by hope; “man has no other power than this” (380). This is a perspective perfectly suited for sustaining a stable and fruitful existence on Oakeshott’s ship at sea.⁶⁶

These conceptions of human maturity are closely tied to the fifth implication of Oakeshott’s philosophical anthropology, namely, his conception of the human prospect. On his account, human existence is a predicament for which there is no guarantee of a satisfying outcome. We as individuals have no responsibility for our appearing in this time and place, and yet here we are. What we *are* responsible for is what we do under the circumstances—especially what we make of ourselves (that is, for one’s “self-definition”). While Oakeshott refers to this condition as an ordeal, he allows that it may well be experienced as an adventure. We might, if we receive a proper education, even become fully human. Whether this occurs depends on good fortune at the outset as well as good character thereafter. Essential to such fruition is honesty regarding the loneliness, difficulty, and uncertainty of the enterprise. Above all, we are to understand that all that we esteem need not have emerged and that over time it is subject to utter obliteration. One’s existence is an opportunity to exercise some influence regarding what in fact takes place.

None of this is alien to Polanyi. On his view, we are, both as individuals and a civilization, inescapably embroiled in a perpetual struggle for meaning. Each of us is born into a particular time and place, and it is our “calling,” through the possibilities afforded by such time and place, to recognize and affirm principles and ideals that, being universal, transcend it. In Polanyi’s passionate words, “the precarious foothold gained by man in the realm of ideas lends sufficient meaning to his brief existence; the inherent stability of man seems to me adequately supported and certified by his submission to ideals I believe to be universal” (389).⁶⁷ That humankind has after countless centuries of evolution arrived at this realization and, moreover, that people, as the entities through which the evolutionary process achieves consciousness of its own significance, are capable of playing an essential part in establishing meaning hereafter, is a “great spectacle” (389; cf. 401 and 402)—a spectacle of such grandeur as to inspire hope and to warrant accepting responsibility for its continuance. But in its deeply personal fiduciary character, this is a stance of “ultimate self-reliance” (265). For Polanyi, the human prospect is exhilarating. But a satisfying outcome depends on sustaining belief in the growth of meaning—a belief that must perpetually contend with acidic doubt that is impossible fully to eradicate. If we are to prevail in the struggle for meaning, it will be only through our own efforts. The human prospect is therefore a human responsibility. As with the ship at sea, the challenge is never-ending, and what ensues will be, as with Oakeshott, a consequence of the degree to which we are able to preserve and exploit the traditional resources to which we are heir.

Some readers of Polanyi, while acknowledging the central role of self-reliance in his conception of the human enterprise, might suggest that he nevertheless offers the prospect of a reality (through discovery governed by self-set standards exercised with universal intent) that is more substantial and thereby more reassuring than what is available on Oakeshott’s ship at sea. On this view, Polanyi’s vision, due to his emphasis on universal intent, would thus be more optimistic (or perhaps less pessimistic), in the absence of indubitable epistemological foundations (that could sustain a logically compelling demonstrative argument), than what is found in Oakeshott. While this aspiration is understandable and even predictable, it reveals a

failure fully to appreciate Oakeshott's account as well as a significant underestimation of the radical character of Polanyi's vision.

It will prove useful to review some of the features, noted above, that constitute this radical vision. Two matters in particular call for emphasis: coherence₂ and Polanyi's conception of the mature response to the human condition.

As we saw earlier, while Polanyi explicitly rejects coherence (coherence₁) as the measure of truth and the mark of reality, he goes on to affirm the central role played by affirmation (growing out of conscientious personal satisfaction) in determining what is true and real. The Zande view of the world, viewed without prejudice, fits together as well and is as stable as the rival naturalistic account. Both are coherent, and thus coherence fails as a criterion for choosing between them. But we are here referring simply to coherence₁. In rejecting the Zande view, Polanyi, in an act of personal affirmation, is exercising coherence₂. In doing so, as we also saw, there is for Polanyi in principle no appeal to an independent external authority. The bar for satisfaction, and thereby for the honorific "true" or "real," is the constituents of conscience. These necessarily consist of what the inquirer or explorer, based on personal formation and rearing by and participation in a tradition of conscientious investigation, brings to the moment. Inquiry and exploration may indeed lead to unexpected manifestations of reality. But if and when they do, it is due to the influence of past experience enlisted in the service of the affirmation we have labelled "coherence₂."

As we also noted earlier, the mark of maturity for Polanyi is to acknowledge the comparative simplicity of this epistemological landscape and come no longer to be disappointed by it. It is to recognize the essential role played by the personal (belief with universal intent) and to affirm the significance of affirmation. It is to maintain the conviction that reality exists and will, over time, become more fully revealed, while also understanding that it can and will do so only through the personal participation that Polanyi so persistently describes and emphasizes. In highlighting the inescapable role of the personal in knowing, Polanyi is not "cutting us off" from reality but is, instead, reminding us once again of just what reality can and does mean.

In elaborating on Polanyi in this fashion, the point is not that he on essential matters is similar to Oakeshott but rather that Oakeshott, especially with his image of the ship at sea, approximates what is passionately expressed in *Personal Knowledge* by Polanyi. Oakeshott's account becomes all the richer to the degree that he more fully appreciates Polanyi's emphasis on the personal and understands the importance for his own position of recognizing and affirming the role played by coherence₂.

By now, the meaning of the epigraph to this study should be evident. As is the case with Polanyi, Oakeshott affirms the fallibility of any claim to know. Making the epigraph especially important is that Oakeshott expresses fallibility in terms of his emphasis on experience. If and when a claim to know turns out to be unfounded, this is (and can only be) because it fails to cohere with other elements of experience. Naturally, that which is cited to discredit the claim to know may, in principle, itself subsequently prove to be unfounded. But that, too, would be the result of failing to cohere with yet other instances of experience. Oakeshott, that is to say, means precisely what he says—and nothing else. Might we wish for something more than this and experience disappointment in its absence? Well, yes, of course. Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* notes that the objectivist infection runs deep and that even he, after years of curative reflection, is not fully free of it. This confession, however, occurs in the context of reminding the reader that the primary impediment to a clear and accurate understanding of truth and reality is a persistent tyrannical expectation of something allegedly more substantive and enduring than the fruit of

personal affirmation and the exercise of universal intent within a contingent community of explorers over time.

Polanyi's view of the matter is captured in an easily overlooked simile. In chapter 3 of *Personal Knowledge* (titled "Order"), he states, "[t]he application of crystallographic theory to experience is open to the hazards of empirical refutation only in the same sense as a marching song played by a band at the head of a marching column. If it is not found apposite it will not be popular" (47). "Apposite," of course, is not tantamount to "arbitrary" or "subjective," for, ideally, determination of appositeness reflects the impact of appropriate (expert) authority as well as the influence of an effective and fruitful tradition of inquiry and discovery. Yet determining something to be apposite is eminently *personal*. Polanyi makes much the same point later in *Personal Knowledge*. In the chapter titled "Articulation," he states,

by being prepared to speak in our language on future occasions, we anticipate its applicability to future experiences, which we expect to be identifiable in terms of natural classes accredited by our language. These expectations form a theory of the universe, which we keep testing continuously as we go on talking about things. So long as we feel that our language clarifies things well, we remain satisfied that it is right and we continue to accept the theory of the universe in our language as true. (80)⁶⁸

Language and the world implied by it, that is to say, remains authoritative so long as we find it apposite. The immediately relevant points here are (1) that subsequent experience serves as the bar for such determination, (2) nothing beyond and presumably more substantive than subsequent (and prior) experience is available, and (3) Polanyi is urging the reader to transcend the appetite for something more (and to eschew any disappointment over its absence).

It is important to realize that Polanyi's account is fully compatible with his emphasis on universal intent and discovery. But the result of discovery and the product of universal intent (what we above labelled "coherence₂") are recognizable only in light of what has already come to be understood, and they in turn are liable to their own eclipse. Some discoveries are markedly radical and disruptive. But a "discovery" not subscribing to these conditions would be no discovery at all. It would be, to use Oakeshott's term, a "non-entity." As the analysis in this section has endeavored to show, Polanyi's universal intent and its objects, and discovery and its results (including Polanyi's "firmament of truth and greatness" [*PK*, 380]), are, so to speak, on the ship at sea, where they are enlisted as resources. In light of what Polanyi himself states, they can be no place else.⁶⁹

The Question of Moral Relativism

The moment has arrived to assess the allegation that Oakeshott's portrayal of the human enterprise entails moral relativism. This indictment was set forth at the outset of this study, but treatment of the matter was postponed until after establishing important affinities between Oakeshott's account of human activity and that of Polanyi. The delay was required in order to provide the second premise in the following argument: Polanyi, despite his manifest emphasis on the personal, is not a moral relativist; in relevant significant respects, there is a deep affinity between the views of Oakeshott and Polanyi; and therefore, Oakeshott, too, is not a moral relativist. To the defense of this argument, we now turn.

Polanyi's Disavowal of Moral Relativism

Polanyi's rejection of moral relativism, a component of part 3 of *Personal Knowledge* ("The Justification of Personal Knowledge"), occurs within a surrounding discussion of the nature of belief. Polanyi begins that discussion by asserting that "[t]o believe something is a mental act" (313). Specifically, believing is the activity involved in determining what is true. Like any activity, believing "can go wrong." Believing goes wrong when that which we believe turns out to be false. Perhaps the most significant element in Polanyi's argument is the claim that "[a]ny act of factual knowing presupposes somebody who believes he knows what is being believed to be known" (313). Believing that one knows, that is to say, is a *personal* act. In affirming a belief, one makes a commitment. Indeed, commitment is "the framework within which we may believe something to be true" (315).⁷⁰ One stands personally behind a claim that he asserts should be universally accepted. Therefore, far from being a faulty substitute for a presumably more secure and reliable epistemological stance, commitment is for Polanyi a necessary condition for belief and, through belief, for contact with reality and arriving at the truth. Further, commitment-based belief is anything but arbitrary: the commitment is an eminently responsible act grounded in conscientious observance of standards and principles, the honoring of which Polanyi refers to as our "calling" (315).⁷¹ We believe X because we must, and due to this imperative we affirm, with universal intent, that others should believe it as well. In short, for Polanyi, saying "'p' is true" is fundamentally equivalent to "I believe p." Significantly, realizing that his position is easily misinterpreted or misunderstood, Polanyi adds that it is not solipsistic. This is because he affirms the existence not only of an independent reality that is known but also of other persons who can know that reality and that we wish to understand it as we do.

What, then, of relativism? Polanyi observes that while individuals may disagree on what they believe is true, they concur in making their assertions with universal intent. This allows Polanyi to state that "though every person may believe something different to be true, there is only one truth" (315). And because "[t]here remains only one truth to speak about," Polanyi concludes that his account is not relativistic (316).

Some readers will find this response to relativism to be unsophisticated and therefore ineffective. But for Polanyi, the simplicity of the response is a virtue because, due to that simplicity, it is performatively consistent and avoids attempting the impossible. What would be impossible under Polanyi's view is a logically unassailable refutation of relativism. His brief and straightforward response to the relativism reminds us of what he says regarding skepticism:

I shall not argue with the sceptic. It would not be consistent with my own views if I expected him to abandon a complete system of beliefs on account of any particular series of difficulties.... I cannot hope to do more...than to exhibit a possibility which like-minded people may wish to explore. (315)

This statement is followed by an all-too-easily overlooked additional declaration: "I shall go on, therefore, to repeat my fundamental *belief* that, in spite of the hazards involved, I am called on to search for the truth and state my findings" (315; emphasis added). When Polanyi asserts that "'p' is true" is fundamentally equivalent to "I believe p," he is offering an instance of the very thing (a belief and claim to truth) he is describing. In order to achieve performative consistency, Polanyi's account of belief and truth necessarily must share the features outlined in his portrayal of belief and truth. Polanyi does not refute relativism. He has no intention to do so. Instead, he affirms his understanding of belief and truth and then demonstrates that this affirmation is

incompatible with relativism. But, the critic might ask, is not Polanyi's position guilty of the equally egregious sin of subjectivism? Polanyi's answer is "no," because that in contrast with which his view would rank as subjectivist is an illusion (and hence the suggestion is empty). It is an illusion because Polanyi has already outlined an account of belief and truth that rules out such a possibility. And, in a remarkable instance of performative consistency, Polanyi modestly notes that he offers nothing more than that which he describes ("p is true," which is to say, "I believe p"). And yet, despite the absence of foundational resolution, the stakes involved are ultimate: "different systems of acknowledged competence are separated by a logical gap, across which they threaten each other by their persuasive passions. They are contesting each other's mental existence" (319).

"Oakeshott's Moral Relativism" Redux

On what grounds is Oakeshott deemed a moral relativist? Are they sound? What bearing do Polanyi's insights have on the matter?

We have already encountered two allegations of relativism directed at Oakeshott by scholars well acquainted with Polanyi. The first, articulated by Walter Mead, maintained that Oakeshott's ultimate reliance on tradition (or, in his later thought, on "practice"), and the corresponding exclusion of appeal to a transcendent norm, entails moral relativism. The second allegation came from Mark Mitchell. At first, sounding much like Mead, Mitchell asserted that, in providing no criterion beyond coherence, Oakeshott inescapably succumbs to relativism. Later, however, Mitchell, reflecting a deeper grasp of Oakeshott's position (and, incidentally, the discovery of a misunderstanding underlying Mead's allegation of moral relativism), modified his initial judgment to conclude that while it is a fundamental misreading of Oakeshott to accuse him of relativism *between* traditions, he remains guilty of relativism *within* individual traditions. This follows, according to Mitchell, because Oakeshott's vision is marked by the absence of any bar capable of adjudicating between equally authoritative moral "intimations."

Additional allegations of Oakeshott's relativism are widespread outside the Polanyi community.⁷² Prominent among these is a critique launched by D. D. Raphael in a review of *Rationalism in Politics* to which Oakeshott replied.⁷³ Because Mitchell in the end echoes the critical stance occupied by Raphael, there is abundant reason to examine carefully Raphael's critique and Oakeshott's reply.

Raphael begins by reminding the reader that, for Oakeshott, justification in political life can occur only in terms of coherence with one or more "intimations" of the tradition within which one finds himself. But, Raphael observes, intimations may be numerous, and they frequently are in conflict. Which intimations are we to follow, and why? How are we to determine the direction in which to move? For Raphael (and Mitchell), it is evident that appeal to an authority beyond the intimations themselves is necessary for rational justification to occur. On Oakeshott's view, however, there is nothing beyond the intimations to which to appeal. Hence, Raphael concludes that given the absence of an appropriate standard or criterion, and the fact that instances of coherence may well be incompatible, Oakeshott's position ranks as moral relativism.

Oakeshott's reply is a tutorial on what for him is obvious. Yes, indeed, a tradition may contain a number of intimations, and intimations are at times in conflict. In deciding what to do, there typically is a contest between competing authoritative claims. Political actors are creatures of circumstance, and it is within a particular setting that a decision is made. In achieving the coherent response that we call "a satisfactory justification," one or more intimations is victorious over others. This is the meaning of deliberation.

Oakeshott in his reply also executes a *reductio ad absurdum*. Let us assume that Raphael is correct in affirming, as a necessary condition for satisfactory justification, the need for a standard or criterion (a norm) that exists independent of the tradition in which we reside. How, Oakeshott asks, is the norm itself to be justified? Since an appeal to yet another norm would be necessary, Raphael's critique is plagued by infinite regress.

But Oakeshott is less interested in logical niceties than he is in delineating a compelling account of what in fact takes place. What is required in political life, and what actually occurs therein, is a pedestrian process that is a considerable distance from the empyrean constructions of the rationalist mind: "What is sought is a decision which promises the most acceptable balance in the circumstances between competing goods; and what we expect in justification of a choice is argument to persuade us that what was sought has been achieved."⁷⁴ Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of this account is its modesty as well as the implicit characterological features of the persons involved: the individuals in question aim for "the most acceptable" outcome in light of the actual circumstances. That there are competing goods and, as a result, inevitable conflict is well understood. The actors aim for and are satisfied by (the prevailing sense of) adequate persuasion (as opposed to requiring an indubitable clear and distinct outcome). In short, in political life and the practical domain generally, it is necessary simply to get by, and that is what we aim to do. As Oakeshott summarily observes, "Practical argument is circumstantial" and it revolves round the contingencies of an occasion." It is "not designed to reach universal conclusions but to recommend or to justify a proposal about what to do now." Significantly, Oakeshott's tutorial closes with this striking reminder: if a practical argument "appeals to a 'principle' its main concern must be to show us the bearing of this 'principle' upon the occasion, which cannot be done demonstratively."⁷⁵ The practical domain of politics does not require, and has little use for, the proofs of philosophy.⁷⁶

Oakeshott then concludes by reflecting on what lies behind Raphael's passionate allegation of moral relativism. Raphael, he says, is dissatisfied with his account because of Raphael's "need" for a principle. But this in turn is the product of "his reluctance to recognize an argument which is incapable of being demonstrative."⁷⁷ As we will see, at the root of the controversy is an inappropriate expectation or what might more properly be called a pernicious appetite.

The Under-Appreciated Polanyian Contribution

Oakeshott's reply to Raphael would have been richer, more effective, and more clearly profound—more "coherent" in Oakeshott's sense of the term—had he fully appreciated the courage and candor of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*.⁷⁸ To understand how, let us begin by recalling that the pivotal observation in Oakeshott's response to the charge of relativism is that any conceivable principle (i.e., any conceivable norm, standard, or criterion to which one might appeal during moral deliberation) is as much on the ship at sea as are the "intimations" from which on his account we in political decision-making take our bearings. Oakeshott, however, fails to recognize the degree and depth to which Polanyi subscribes to this vision. Indeed, Polanyi, due to his focus on the personal, is the more forthright and comprehensive in articulating the deepest implications of it. This is especially true in regard to the possibilities for justification.

There is no more effective path to understanding *Personal Knowledge* than to view it as an explication and endorsement of what, as noted above, Polanyi calls "balance of mind."⁷⁹ The label identifies a perspective characterized, above all, by commitment to consistency. A comprehensive encounter with Polanyi prompts us to ask a pair of questions: What does it truly

mean to characterize political life as a ship, without origin or destination, sailing on a boundless sea? How is “balance of mind” the appropriate response to that condition?

Among the most striking images offered in *Personal Knowledge* is Polanyi’s own metaphor of “the second apple” (*PK*, 268). This image, of course, relies on the biblical account in which Adam and Eve, under the influence of the serpent, bite of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Due to the transgression, humankind is expelled from Paradise (a condition of innocence) and is eternally marked by a moral complexity previously unknown. As a consequence, humans are troubled in an unprecedented way.

In Polanyi’s sweeping account of Western intellectual and cultural history, biblical authority steadily erodes (especially in the wake of the Copernican discovery), and we eventually find ourselves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which the most energetic and influential minds proudly and confidently declare their independence from the alleged theocratic fantasies of the species’ youth. Such confidence is largely a product of humanity’s growing appreciation of their own investigative powers. It becomes evident that the universe can in fact be understood, and people, exclusively through their own devices, are capable of unlocking its secrets (that is, grasping the fundamental principles) and thereby making sense of it all. These are heady times. Significantly, these sophisticated minds are still marked by a yearning comparable to that of the earlier religious believers. No less than their predecessors, they seek order and meaning. Or, more fundamentally, the later thinkers represent a continuation of the desire to discern some sense in the universe and to grasp the significance of humankind’s place within it. But now, without precedent, the old appetite coexists with “the greatly increased critical powers of man” that have “endowed our mind with a capacity for self-transcendence of which we can never again divest ourselves” (268). Polanyi then completes the picture:

We have plucked from the Tree a second apple which has for ever imperiled our knowledge of Good and Evil, and we must learn to know these qualities henceforth in the blinding light of our new analytical powers. Humanity has been deprived a second time of its innocence, and driven out of another garden which was at any rate a Fool’s Paradise. Innocently, we had trusted that we could be relieved of all personal responsibility for our beliefs by objective criteria of validity and our own critical powers have shattered that hope. Struck by our sudden nakedness, we may try to brazen it out by flaunting it in a profession of nihilism. But modern man’s immorality is unstable. Presently his moral passions reassert themselves in objectivist disguise and the scientific Minotaur is born. (268)

The first thing to note in this powerful image is that humankind over the centuries has experienced an important transformation that cannot be undone.⁸⁰ Any response we might devise for contemporary challenges and difficulties will need to be formulated in conjunction with a critical sophistication and potential for transcendence that cannot be reversed.⁸¹ By “transcendence” Polanyi means a proclivity for critical distancing from any candidate idea or formulation and a propensity to identify and subject to critical scrutiny its underlying presuppositions. In short, the acidic impulse toward skepticism is indefatigable and ineradicable. If the perspective that reigned prior to the second apple has disappeared, that which is responsible for this disappearance has not.

A second central feature of Polanyi’s metaphor is that the partaking of the second apple, and the related forced departure from the new paradise, consists of just the sort of realization that

characterizes the operation of such transcendence. Specifically, the expulsion was a direct result of seeing that there are no “objective criteria” in light of which to ground an ethics or make sense of the world. It is important to emphasize that these dramatic reactions to the loss of objective criteria presuppose the legitimacy of the conviction that such foundations are intellectually and morally necessary. We witness here in intellectual guise the persistent appetite mentioned above in connection with the analyses of both Polanyi and Oakeshott as well as with Raphael’s critique of the latter.

It is now evident why Polanyi states that biting the second apple has “imperiled our knowledge of Good and Evil.” In the same way that the earlier supernatural order, formalized in scripture and church doctrine and manifestly a product of an authority that spoke from a domain apart from and beyond that of humans, deteriorated in the face of humans’ critical powers, so too via the tasting of the second apple did its successor, predicated on “the authority of experience and reason,” collapse (265). The pride of jettisoning the theocentric perspective and deriving our ethics instead from the world known by the senses and explicated by human reasoning gave way to despair and desperation born of the same critical tendencies that destroyed the earlier order. The loss of any external authority from which we can take our cues constitutes a new “nakedness.” Polanyi’s genius consists in recognizing this condition and in formulating a fertile, albeit revolutionary, response to it.

Before outlining that response, it is important to note the fundamental similarity between this new nakedness and the condition aboard Oakeshott’s ship at sea. In both cases, there is no valid and effective appeal to a domain independent of (our experience of) present and past human activity itself. But Polanyi, via the striking image of the second apple, has, through a deepening of the problematic condition, transformed the central human drama from the predicament of the ship’s inhabitants considered collectively to the predicament facing each of the constituent individuals. As a result, the problem of justification becomes more fundamental precisely because it shows itself to be essentially and eminently personal.

Polanyi refers to the justificatory predicament besetting the reflective and intellectually honest individual in this post-second apple (or “post-critical”) condition as the problem or “paradox” of “self-set standards.” In the chapter of *Personal Knowledge* titled “The Art of Knowing,” Polanyi states that “since every act of personal knowing appreciates the coherence of certain particulars it implies also submission to certain standards of coherence” (63). He then goes on to say, “All personal knowing appraises what it knows by a standard set to itself” (63). Coherence, of course, is the sole criterion of justification for Oakeshott. What Polanyi is asserting is that Oakeshott’s bar is itself subject to a deeper criterion and, further, that this criterion is self-set.⁸² So wherein lies the problem? As Polanyi notes throughout *Personal Knowledge*, thereby revealing that he, like Oakeshott, understands himself to be on the ship at sea, the standards that we hold with universal intent and apply in acts of knowing and justification have a historically contingent origin. In Polanyi’s stark formulation, “we hold with universal intent a set of convictions acquired by our particular upbringing” (203). The danger here is that we are strongly tempted, indeed, perhaps even compelled, to infer from the admission that convictions (standards) are local and contingent that they lack genuine authority. They are “merely” particular. Under this perspective, “to the extent to which we acknowledge that we have actively decided to accept [those convictions and standards], they will tend to appear arbitrary” (203).⁸³ Therefore, only a dupe would give way to them (211). To accept the authority of convictions that we acknowledge are contingent and local would indicate that we have foolishly regarded standards that are merely “adventitious” (204) to be universal. No responsible individual can consent to such bad faith! It would seem, therefore, that in the absence of the

possibility of appeal to an authority beyond the ship, intellectually responsible justification is impossible. Polanyi, however, addresses this problem head-on. His response consists of a radical reorientation in frame of mind.⁸⁴

In setting the stage for a description of this mind, let us note that tradition (as a source of formation and authority as well as an enduring trans-generational vehicle for such) remains as important in Polanyi's account of the human condition as it is for Oakeshott. What Polanyi will make clear is that tradition achieves its significance through its personally mediated impact on the individual and derives its meaning from the personally understood contributions of untold prior individuals. Tradition exercises an important role because, and only because, it is an aspect of the ship at sea. When it plays a part in political deliberation, it is as a resource already on board. In this connection, let us again recall that some Polanyian scholars have criticized Oakeshott for eschewing appeal to a (purportedly independent) reality that is central in the thought of Polanyi. We are now able to recognize the inappropriateness of this criticism. Like tradition, "reality" possesses meaning and can play a constructive role in our growing understanding only insofar as it is a feature of shipboard existence. As careful readers of Polanyi have emphasized, reality for Polanyi is characterized by "indeterminate future manifestations," and the hopeful expectation of such, stimulated by tacit "foreknowledge" of it, plays a vital role in a vibrant life of exploration and discovery.⁸⁵ But even while for Polanyi there is reality-yet-to-be-known, both the prospect and the knowledge of it exist only insofar as they touch us personally here and now. (This is a single reality that is present both tacitly at the outset and focally at the completion of the act of knowing.) In short, reality too, which is simultaneously both a given and a creation of humankind, is necessarily on the ship.⁸⁶ It exists for Polanyi only through personal affirmation of belief, which, of course, is an experience, and, as Oakeshott continues to emphasize, experience is *the unity of* experiencing and that which is experienced (making each of the two poles, taken alone, imaginary).⁸⁷ It certainly is proper to label Polanyi a "realist," but by his own analysis we must conclude that such realism, due to the inescapable role of the personal in its discovery and appreciation, is subordinate to Oakeshott's conception of experience. Yet, as has been noted, the reciprocal fact is that Oakeshott's "idealism" is subordinate to Polanyi's conception of the personal, including its emphasis on a reality yet to be discovered.

Having now clarified the Polanyian personalist deepening of the condition represented by Oakeshott's ship at sea, let us next explore the mind, immune equally to objectivist delusion and relativist temptation, with which Polanyi responds.

As noted earlier, Polanyi commences chapter 10 of *Personal Knowledge* with a remarkable confession:

"I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings." This sentence, summarizing my fiduciary programme, conveys an ultimate belief which I find myself holding. Its assertion must therefore prove consistent with its content by practising what it authorizes. (299; Polanyi's emphasis)

Polanyi then articulates the fundamental paradox that defines balance of mind. He states,

This is indeed true. For in uttering this sentence I both say that I must commit myself by thought and speech, and do so at the same time. Any inquiry into our

ultimate beliefs can be consistent only if it presupposes its own conclusions. It must be intentionally circular. (299)

The capacity to grasp and appreciate “the fundamental paradox” defines the very core of the balance sought and recommended by Polanyi. It is a frame of mind whose existence requires a constant renewal of commitment. Making the paradox possible as well as necessary is the marked absence in this account of reference to anything impersonally objective and of any desire for it.

We have seen that for Polanyi everyone is born into a particular set of contingent circumstances. Rather than deny our particularity out of fear of prejudice or subjective contamination, Polanyi embraces it and notes that he, like the rest of us, just happens to have emerged when and where he did and to believe what he does. But, in opposition to the modern critical mind, he will not be defeated by this fact: “Believing as I do in the justification of deliberate intellectual commitments, I accept these accidents of personal existence as the concrete opportunities for exercising our personal responsibility. *This acceptance is the sense of my calling*” (322; Polanyi’s emphasis). Our particular circumstances are not a limitation but instead an opportunity. Yet they are so only if we believe this is the case and act in that light. The action envisioned and, importantly, practiced by Polanyi himself (not the least in the very authoring of *Personal Knowledge*) begins by taking personal responsibility for one’s movement toward the truth and, as the first step in taking such responsibility, committing oneself to that endeavor and establishing and maintaining faith in the effort’s positive outcome.

In this account of the balanced mind, both commitment and submission are prominent. Commitment is vital in the early stages of establishing a life open to the prospect of truth. But as we proceed along the resulting path, we find that we are increasingly sustained through submission. In this vein, Polanyi remarks, “Within its commitments the mind is warranted to exercise much ampler powers than those by which it is supposed to operate under objectivism; but by the very fact of assuming this new freedom it submits to a higher power to which it had hitherto refused recognition” (323).

Revealing the deep affinity between Polanyi’s vision and Oakeshott’s metaphor, Polanyi goes on to note that a prominent feature of the balanced mind is self-reliance: “We cast off the limitations of objectivism in order to fulfil our calling, which bids us to make up our minds about the whole range of matters with which man is properly concerned” (324). Earlier, he has stated, “we must accredit our own judgment as the paramount arbiter of all our intellectual performances.... [This is the] ultimate self-reliance, to which this entire book shall bear witness” (265). Polanyi is second to none in wishing to know, but the mark of arriving at the truth has changed. As noted earlier, for Polanyi “*truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it*” (305; Polanyi’s emphasis). The views of our fellow inquirers, present and future, of course play an indispensable role in whether we can believe and hence in what we do believe. It is because securing the assent of relevant authorities is an essential part of coming to believe the object of our commitment that Polanyi employs the dramatic formulation, “Our vision must conquer or die” (150). The searcher is self-reliant but never alone.

Finally, we arrive at the most distinctive characteristic of the balanced mind. It is a feature made possible, as well as strikingly appealing, through our having been relieved of any presumed indispensability of external objective criteria. Let us in this connection hear at length from Polanyi:

Those who are satisfied by hoping that their intellectual commitments fulfil their calling, will not find their hopes discouraged when realizing on reflection that they are only hopes. I have said that my belief in commitment is a commitment of the very kind that it authorizes; therefore, if its justification be questioned, it finds confirmation in itself. Moreover, any such confirmation will likewise prove stable towards renewed critical reflection, and so on, indefinitely. Thus, by contrast to a statement of fact claiming to be impersonal, an affirmation made in terms of a commitment gives rise to no insatiable sequence of subsequent justifications. Instead of indefinitely shifting an ever open problem within the regress of the objectivist criticism of objectivist claims, our reflections now move from an original state of intellectual hopes to a succession of equally hopeful positions; so that by rising above this movement and reflecting on it as a whole we find the continuance of this regress unnecessary. (324)

Polanyi goes on to remark, “Commitment offers to those who accept it legitimate grounds for the affirmation of personal convictions with universal intent” (324). The balanced mind, then, enjoys grounds but has dispensed with foundations. Indeed, its distinctiveness is ultimately rooted in its thoroughgoing liberation from the idea that we require such foundations. In the place of what Polanyi characterizes as the futile and fruitless interminable quest for objectively compelling foundations, he offers a perspective that acknowledges the inescapable personal nature of our knowing and our participation in the world. Justification still exists, of course, and it remains legitimate and incumbent to seek it. But we are now released from the insistent yet intrinsically disappointing demand for satisfaction of strictly external objective criteria. Instead, Polanyi invites us to be committed to commitment and to place our hopes in hope itself. Consequences will ensue from doing so, and these can and will be assessed. But the assessment will be in terms of what we and, vital to Polanyi’s account, what our fellow explorers believe and are committed to. In this fashion “we thus resume our full intellectual powers” (324). That is, our coming to know the truth occurs within a context of faith manifest in commitment. Our claims about the world may prove true or false. Whatever their fate, however, the resolution is the product of standards whose authority is rooted in our commitment to them. Finally, as Polanyi repeatedly emphasizes throughout *Personal Knowledge*, this very account of the balanced mind and his recommendation of it are themselves subject to the same standards—necessarily so, if we are to honor this account with our consistency. Polanyi’s peculiar assertion thus makes the most perfect sense: “To the question, ‘Who convinces whom here?’ it answers simply, ‘I am trying to convince myself’” (265). This assertion is an amplification of an earlier statement from the same page: “Seen in the round, man stands at the beginning and at the end, as begetter and child of his own thought.”

Life on Oakeshott’s ship at sea both gives rise to Polanyi’s balanced mind and is sustained by it. Among the primary features of that mind is a paradoxical merger of self-reliance and submission to authority—a commitment to self-set standards held with universal intent—that renders the allegation of a prevalent moral relativism among the crew ignorant and jejune. Polanyi’s balanced mind escapes the confines imposed by the heretofore authoritative antinomy of objectivism and relativism. To see that Oakeshott in his account of political life is not a moral relativist, it is only necessary to appreciate the frame of mind implicit in that account and so fruitfully described and modelled by the Polanyi of *Personal Knowledge*.

In summary, then, humankind for Polanyi resides on the ship at sea as much as it does for Oakeshott. This conclusion is not the product of shoehorning Polanyi to fit Oakeshott’s metaphor

but rather the result of paying close attention to the Polanyi of *Personal Knowledge* and thinking through the implications of what he states therein. For neither writer would it be accurate to suggest that humankind was thereby *restricted* in perspective or denied access to something beyond. This is because the use of such terms presupposes a possibility that simply does not exist within their respective accounts of the human condition. Herein lies the deepest affinity between their rich and complex epistemological and anthropological projects.

We have seen that Polanyi's vision of human activity (including, most notably, moral justification) does not make him a relativist. Thus, given the congruence of the two writers' conception of the human condition and its possibilities, we conclude that Oakeshott also is not a relativist. Oakeshott effectively defends this judgment in his own terms. What we have further established, however, is that Oakeshott is not a moral relativist on *Polanyian* grounds—grounds that are deeper, more comprehensive, and more clearly profound than those offered in his own defense by Oakeshott.

August 15, 2024

ENDNOTES

¹Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 [1933]), 29. Hereafter, this volume will be referred to as "*EM*." Illustrating the consistency of Oakeshott's thought over the decades is the following passage from the much later *On Human Conduct* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975): "Contingency [which is for Oakeshott an essential feature of human conduct], then, is a relationship between 'goings-on' identified as individual occurrences exhibiting intelligence (human actions and utterances) in which they are understood in the only way in which their formal character as such individual occurrences allows them to be understood, namely, in terms of their dependent connections with other such occurrences" (103). Hereafter, this volume will be referred to as "*OHC*."

²Michael Oakeshott, "The Human Coefficient," *Encounter* 11, no. 3 (September 1958): 77–80. Of considerable interest is a response to Oakeshott's review by Marjorie Grene. The response comes in the form of a letter to the editor titled "Personal Knowledge," published in the next issue of *Encounter* (11, no. 4 [October 1958]: 67–68).

³Walter B. Mead, "The Importance of Michael Oakeshott for Polanyian Studies: With Reflections on Oakeshott's *The Voice of Liberal Learning*," *Tradition and Discovery* 31, no. 2 (2004–2005): 37–44.

⁴*Ibid.*, 43.

⁵Mark T. Mitchell, "Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott: Common Ground, Uncommon Foundations," *Tradition and Discovery* 28, no. 2 (2001–2002): 23–34, at 31.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.* These sentences are from *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974 [first published in 1958]), 294. Hereafter, this volume will be referred to as "*PK*."

⁸Mitchell, "Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott," 32.

⁹Mark T. Mitchell, *The Limits of Liberalism: Tradition, Individualism, and the Crisis of Freedom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 91.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 92.

¹¹See note 1.

¹²“Talking Politics,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London and New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1962 [reprinted by Liberty Press in 1991]), 438–61, at 460. Hereafter, this volume will be referred to as “*Rationalism*.”

¹³Neal Wood, “A Guide to the Classics: The Skepticism of Professor Oakeshott,” *The Journal of Politics* 21, no. 4 (November 1959): 647–662, at 648. Many students of Polanyi will be repelled by the apparent demotion, if not the outright dismissal, of reality in this passage. As we will see, this reaction is both unnecessary and inappropriate. On a more positive note, such readers will be pleased at the reference to achievement and judgment in connection with perception.

¹⁴*EM*, 85. An English translation of this phrase is “under the perspective of past times.”

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 132. Cf. 135: “Science is the attempt to conceive of the world under the category of quantity.... Scientific observation is designed expressly to replace observations in terms of personal feelings by observations of an absolute stability, by quantitative measurements. All scientific observation is measurement of one kind or another.”

¹⁶*EM*, 197: “what distinguishes practical activity from all other worlds of experience is that in it the alteration of existence is undertaken.” A page later there is this elaboration: “in practical experience what is distinctive is not the end pursued, but the means followed to achieve this end. In practice a coherent world of experience is achieved by means of action, by the introduction of actual change into existence. And the aspect of mind involved is the will. Practice is the exercise of the will; practical thought is volition; practical experience is the world *sub specie voluntatis*” (198).

¹⁷*EM*, 75: “no line can be drawn between what is presupposed and what is known. What is known is always in terms of what is presupposed.”

¹⁸For the denial of direct relationship, see *EM*, 192. Oakeshott is nothing if not explicit: “Between these worlds, then, there can be neither dispute nor agreement; they are wholly irrelevant to one another. And an argument or an inference which pretended to pass from one world to another would be the pattern of all forms of *ignoratio elenchi*. An idea cannot serve two worlds” (*EM*, 252).

¹⁹Students of Polanyi will here be reminded of the propensity for “adaptation” (Piaget’s “accommodation”) that is a major feature of what he labels “the educated mind.” See *PK*, 105.

²⁰“All knowledge whatever is ‘knowing that...’ in the sense that (a) all knowledge is judgment, and (b) all judgment is of the real. Judgment in knowledge by acquaintance is, perhaps, not explicit because the particular content is relatively isolated from the complete world to which it belongs, but were the isolation absolute there would be no knowledge at all because there would be no judgment” (*EM*, 41, note).

²¹The astute reader grounded in the Polanyian perspective is no doubt growing uncomfortable with the implications of Oakeshott’s analysis for the stature of Polanyi’s tacit knowing. Our path leads inexorably to examination of this matter.

²²The latter suggestion is the apotheosis of nonsense for Oakeshott.

²³In English: “Truth needs no sign.”

²⁴“There is...no object apart from a subject; no subject independent of an object” (*EM*, 46).

²⁵“And the question for us is not, How can we get outside our purely personal experience to a world of objective, real existence? but, Where is the experience in which reality is given fully?” (46).

²⁶Michael Oakeshott, “A Place of Learning,” in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,

1989), 17–42, at 21 (emphasis added). The essay was first published in 1975. Hereafter, this volume will be referred to as “*Voice*.”

²⁷Michael Oakeshott, “Education: Its Engagement and Its Frustration,” in *Voice*, 63–94, at 64 (emphasis added). The essay was first published in 1972.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 71. Through such formation we achieve “a self-understanding. It gives an answer to the question, who am I?” (“A Place of Learning,” 26).

²⁹Cf. *ibid.*, 27: “Even in the most difficult circumstances, overwhelmed by the exigencies of the moment...[human beings] have carried these identities with them and imparted them to their children if only in songs and stories.” Cf. also 34.

³⁰“Education: Its Engagement and Its Frustration,” 64.

³¹*Ibid.*, 89. Whatever the subject matter, be it bricklaying or nuclear physics, the teacher may well have a personal lasting influence that is most certainly tacit: “If it is learned, it can never be forgotten, and it does not need to be recollected in order to be enjoyed. It is, indeed, often enough, the residue which remains when all else is forgotten; the shadow of lost knowledge” (“Learning and Teaching,” in *Voice*, 43–62, at 61). This residue, a key component of character, is a “style” that is learned through imitation. It is responsible for the “dispositions” that make possible the intellectual virtues.

³²“Education: Its Engagement and Its Frustration,” 65.

³³*Ibid.*, 67.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 77. The “abolition of man” is also employed somewhat later in “A Place of Learning,” at 32.

³⁵“Education: Its Engagement and Its Frustration,” 78. “Compared to what?” one might ask. Oakeshott responds with his animating vision: “an educational engagement is at once a discipline and a release; and it is the one by virtue of being the other. It is a difficult engagement of learning by study in a continuous and exacting redirection of attention and refinement of understanding which calls for humility, patience, and courage. Its reward is an emancipation from the mere ‘fact of living’, from the immediate contingencies of place and time of birth, from the tyranny of the moment and from the servitude of a merely current condition; it is the reward of a human identity and of a character capable in some measure of the moral and intellectual adventure which constitutes a specifically human life” (93). Suggesting in an even more forthright fashion that Oakeshott has carefully reflected on Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* (published in late 1943) is this passage from a 1965 essay: “And I have called this world our common inheritance because to enter it is the only way of becoming a human being, and to inhabit it is to be a human being” (“Learning and Teaching,” in *Voice*, 43–62, at 45).

³⁶Timothy Fuller, “Introduction,” in *Voice*, 1–16, at 10.

³⁷“Learning and Teaching,” 45.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 48.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 49; emphasis added.

⁴⁰“A Place of Learning,” 23. Cf. “Rational Conduct,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 99–131, at 128: “the only principles and ideals available are in fact abridgements of the lost knowledge of how to behave. They may be presented as something more imposing—as gifts straight from the gods—and a superstitious reverence may be accorded them on account of this appearance; but it is doubtful whether this indulgence in illusion will increase the chances of the cure being effective.”

⁴¹*OHC*, 41.

⁴²While we will later discuss the matter in some detail, we ought at this point to note the similarity of Oakeshott’s vision to what is offered by Polanyi in connection with what he labels

our “calling.” See *PK*, 322: “we are creatures of circumstance. Every mental process by which man surpasses the animals is rooted in the early apprenticeship by which the child acquires the idiom of its native community and eventually absorbs the whole cultural heritage to which it succeeds. Great pioneers may modify this idiom by their own efforts, but even their outlook will remain predominantly determined by the time and place of their origin. And this reliance on the cultural machinery continues through life.” Our calling is to commit ourselves to the principles and ideals that, due to our rearing in a contingent circumstance, we just happen to know and are able to embrace. The central place of “idiom” in the accounts of both Oakeshott and Polanyi will prove significant indeed.

⁴³*OHC*, 78.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁵Michael Oakeshott, “Political Education,” in *Voice*, 136–158, at 149–150. The essay is also included in *Rationalism*, 43–69.

⁴⁶Cf. “Rationalism in Politics,” in *Rationalism*, 5–42, at 17: “there are no origins; all that can be discerned are the slowly mediated changes....”

⁴⁷Timothy Fuller in *Voice*, “Introduction,” 1–16, at 11.

⁴⁸“A Place of Learning,” 23.

⁴⁹*PK*, 150–160.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 319.

⁵¹The other two are those of Heidegger and Whitehead.

⁵²Marjorie Grene, “Personal Knowledge,” 67.

⁵³Cf. Polanyi as he concludes the opening paragraph of the book: “For, as human beings, we must inevitably see the universe from a centre lying within ourselves and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse. Any attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity” (*PK*, 3).

⁵⁴See note 6 above.

⁵⁵See, too, *PK*, 254: “For we can derive rules of observation and verification only from examples of factual statements that we have accepted as true *before* we knew these rules; and *in the end* the application of our rules will necessarily fall back once more on factual observations, the acceptance of which is an act of personal judgment, unguided by any explicit rules. And besides, the application of such rules must rely *all the time* on the guidance of our own personal judgment.”

⁵⁶The fundamental conservatism of this account is importantly qualified by Polanyi. While scientists, and reflective individuals generally, follow an “urge” toward satisfaction, due to “the essential restlessness of the human mind,” they also possess and forever give way to “a craving for mental dissatisfaction” (*PK*, 196). The character of the ship thus changes over time. Yet the very impulse for dissatisfaction exists in order to be resolved. The capacity and desire to achieve renewed satisfaction betrays the effective presence of, and commitment to, principles not meaningfully called into question. Were these to be undermined, the primary duty (i.e., remaining afloat) would be compromised.

⁵⁷See Jon Fennell, “That Our World Might Endure: Polanyi’s ‘Primary Education,’” in *Science, Faith, Society: New Essays on the Philosophy of Michael Polanyi*, ed. Péter Hartl (New York: Springer, 2024), 115–140.

⁵⁸Polanyi’s insight into human formation is richly elaborated in an address that has only recently been published. In “What to Believe,” he emphasizes that belief is the product of belonging to a community and that understanding in turn depends on belief. Due to the influence of belonging, believing, and understanding, the human individual possesses a “state of mind.”

Polanyi adds that the beliefs that are responsible for one's state of mind are in large measure tacit "assumptions" that determine what we find plausible, problematic, or promising. Preponderantly tacit formation through belonging, which gives rise to belief that enables understanding, is consistent with and elaborates Oakeshott's striking insistence that we are not born human but become so through education, broadly conceived. Everyone aboard the ship is a member of the crew. And while we inescapably engage the world as individuals, our identity is fundamentally defined in terms of the challenges (the "predicament") facing the community as a whole. Polanyi's address appears in *Tradition & Discovery* 46, no. 2 (July 2020): 21–28.

⁵⁹Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946), 72.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 83.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 42 and 71–72.

⁶²The concept appears throughout *Personal Knowledge*. It is discussed in detail on pages 321–324.

⁶³In chapter 11 of *Meaning*, titled "Order," Polanyi refers to a modern "looser view of teleology" that he attributes to Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. This alternative "would make it possible for us to suppose that some sort of intelligible directional tendencies may be operative in the world without our having to suppose that they *determine* all things." Polanyi closes the chapter by attributing the widely held contemporary view that the world is "meaningless and pointless" to "the stoppages in our ears that we must pull out if we are ever once more to experience the full range of meanings possible to man." Doing so will permit us to "hear our god speak to us, should he deign to do so." Polanyi can plausibly be understood to accept this looser view of teleology. But occupying such a perspective is precisely an instance of the sense-making, born of human responsibility, described above. The use of the term "teleology" for this possibility is probably misleading. Be that as it may, Oakeshott and Polanyi are in essential agreement regarding the character and origin of meaning. The passages cited in this note are from Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 161–181, at 162 and 181.

⁶⁴Later in the same chapter Polanyi states, "For we must admit that truth and beauty may not prevail, or may not prevail for long" (201).

⁶⁵See Jon Fennell, "'Balance of Mind': Polanyi's Response to the Second Apple and the Modern Predicament," *Tradition & Discovery* 44, no. 2 (July 2018): 47–63.

⁶⁶Cf. *PK*, 321: "My analysis of commitment is itself a profession of faith addressed to such a society [one possessing a viable civic culture and that "is committed as a whole to the standards by which thought is currently accepted in it as valid"] by one of its members, who wishes to safeguard its continued existence, by making it realize and resolutely sustain its own commitment with all its hopes and infinite hazards."

⁶⁷Cf. Polanyi's eloquent summary in the second full paragraph on p. 379 of *PK*.

⁶⁸And our satisfaction will necessarily come to an end: "In this changing world, our anticipatory powers have always to deal with a somewhat unprecedented situation, and they can do so in general only by undergoing some measure of adaptation. More particularly: since every occasion on which a word is used is in some degree different from every previous occasion, we should expect that the meaning of a word will be modified in some degree on every such occasion" (*PK*, 110). Adaptation, which accompanies all discovery and hence the phenomenon of "breaking out" (195 ff.), is one of the two central features of the "educated mind." (Assimilation is the other.) See *PK*, 102–104. Cf. 104–106.

⁶⁹In the face of concern that the ship is tossed about and suffers from insufficient mooring, we must ask, “Compared to what?” Within the account outlined by Oakeshott (and, we are arguing, embraced also by Polanyi), some alleged possibilities are in fact illusory, and it is an empty gesture to assert a deficiency due to their absence. It is, moreover, important to note that universal intent, both in the exercise of self-set standards and in the affirmation of what, through their use, is discovered, is perhaps the superlative device for keeping the ship afloat and providing whatever mooring is possible for a vessel of this sort. “Mooring,” if it is to mean anything at all, must be understood as a condition *aboard* the ship. It is not, and cannot be, a condition *of* the ship, since there is no context within which such a perspective can exist. So, too, is weak or allegedly absent mooring. In other words, mooring or lack thereof is a perspective that belongs to the mind of an inhabitant of the ship. And, speculating beyond anything explicitly stated by Oakeshott, what can we say about the sea? To begin with, whatever meaning it may possess is attributable to concepts and categories belonging to the ship, for all that is known and can be known resides *there*. Thus, while there may be some value in referring loosely to significant possibilities arising out of the sea, precisely speaking this is incoherent. “Possibility” belongs to a perspective on the ship and thus so, too, does “reality” or an alleged manifestation of it. Even “breaking out” requires a preexisting context and is unimaginable without it. But there is little harm, again loosely speaking, in referring to a “reality” that continues to reveal itself. Indeed, belief in such, and faith in its ongoing exposure, are among the principal sustaining features of the ship. No one better understands the vital contribution of belief and faith, *as well as the conditions necessary for their fruition*, than Polanyi.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 315. Cf. 313: “Every act of factual knowing has the structure of a commitment.”

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 315.

⁷²Mitchell offers a useful survey of these criticisms of Oakeshott. See *The Limits of Liberalism*, 89–91.

⁷³D. D. Raphael, “Professor Oakeshott’s *Rationalism in Politics*,” *Political Studies* 12 (1964): 202–215; Michael Oakeshott, “*Rationalism in Politics: A Reply to Professor Raphael*,” *Political Studies* 13 (1965): 89–92.

⁷⁴“*Rationalism in Politics: A Reply to Professor Raphael*,” 91.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁶This is why a further criticism of Oakeshott by Walter Mead is irrelevant. Mead quite properly notes a chasm between Oakeshott’s vision of philosophy (which represents a perspective marked by Absolute knowledge and “completion of the heuristic task” [Mead, 234]) and Polanyi’s wide-open ontology in which reality continues to reveal itself in unanticipated ways and there is no prospect of a final completion, thus assigning the unknown a central role in human life. But morality (and hence the allegation of moral relativism) belongs to Oakeshott’s “practical” mode (in contrast with the intrinsically complete un-“arrested” domain of philosophy). It is in the practical mode that Polanyi and Oakeshott converge, and it is the fundamental contention of this paper that in Oakeshott’s practical mode (which encompasses political and moral life) moral relativism is no more entailed by the absence of an external independent standard than it is in the account of the human enterprise offered by Polanyi. (See Walter B. Mead, “Michael Oakeshott as Philosopher: Beyond Politics, A Quest for Omniscience,” *The Political Science Reviewer* 32 [July 2003]: 221–268.)

⁷⁷“*Rationalism in Politics: A Reply to Professor Raphael*,” 92. And what Oakeshott says of Raphael is a danger for the reader of Oakeshott’s position as well: someone unable to escape the seductive prospect and associated expectation of a “demonstrative” argument is liable to view Oakeshott’s refutation of moral relativism as a concession to it rather than a victory over it. But it

is precisely Oakeshott's point (and that of Polanyi as well) that there is nothing actual in light of which the eminently practical (for Polanyi, the personal) moral calculus is deficient. Oakeshott naturally does not purport to offer what he says does not exist. But it is as inappropriate to lament the absence of the demonstrative argument as it is to celebrate it. The cure in both cases is a maturity of understanding.

⁷⁸That Oakeshott has studied and been influenced by Polanyi is made clear by Harwell Wells. See "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, 1 (January 1994): 129–145, at 137–138. As noted by Wells, Polanyi's *Science, Faith and Society* is approvingly cited by Oakeshott in a note on p. 13 of the 1947 "Rationalism in Politics."

⁷⁹For a fuller account of the concept, see note 65.

⁸⁰On this matter see Polanyi's 1960 essay, "Beyond Nihilism," in *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 3–23, at 22: "We shall not go back on the scientific revolution which has secularized extensive domains of knowledge."

⁸¹"But revision cannot succeed by merely returning to ideas which have already proved unstable" (*ibid.*).

⁸²For example, Polanyi later observes, "Perception is manifestly an activity which seeks to satisfy standards which it sets to itself" (*PK*, 96).

⁸³The "paradox," then, is captured in the question of how it can be that one accepts as a reliable guide a standard that is admittedly derived from oneself. Cf. *PK*, 315.

⁸⁴More specifically, Polanyi understands the task fundamentally to be a "reform of the conception of truth" (204).

⁸⁵See Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," *The Journal of Religion* 41, no. 4 (October 1961): "Our active foreknowledge of an unknown reality is the right motive and guide of knowing in all our mental endeavors" (243). See also, for example, Polanyi, *Society, Faith and Society*, 10: "Real is that which is expected to reveal itself indeterminately in the future." (This is from the 1963 introduction to the book.) For an extended analysis of the meaning and role of reality in Polanyi's thought, see Esther Lightcap Meek, *Contact with Reality: Michael Polanyi's Realism and Why It Matters* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017). Meek calls the cited passage from *Science, Faith and Society* "the reality statement" and assembles this and numerous similar statements by Polanyi in chapter 5 of her book.

⁸⁶Reality, that is to say, is *both* a given *and* a creation. (To say it is simply one or the other is erroneous.) This is where Mitchell, in the conclusion of his 2001–2002 *Tradition and Discovery* paper, goes wrong in classifying Oakeshott (in opposition to Polanyi) a moral relativist due to a lack of "an independent reality that is knowable" (32). As we have seen, Mitchell later retracts the allegation that Oakeshott is a moral relativist between traditions (but continues to maintain that he is such within traditions). Had he more thoroughly understood the meaning of "the ship at sea" and interpreted it in terms of Polanyi's emphasis on the personal, he would have been led to abandon this remaining charge as well.

⁸⁷It would, therefore, be erroneous to state that reality is thus "bound" by experience. It is, instead, *delivered by or through* experience. Such use of "bound" presupposes the precise misleading antinomy that it is Oakeshott's intention to render otiose. Polanyi's emphasis on the personal in the act of knowing has a comparable consequence. Reference to reality outside of experience (or, for Polanyi, independent of affirmation of belief in it) is incoherent.