

# Classical and Conservative Liberalism: Burke, Hayek, Polanyi and Others

Struan Jacobs

ABSTRACT Key words: liberty, freedom, Hayek, Polanyi, Burke, Popper, tradition, liberalism, conservatism. *An extended discussion of Richard Allen's **Beyond Liberalism: The Political Thought of F. A. Hayek & Michael Polanyi** in which the book's prominent themes and arguments are described, and certain inaccuracies and shortcomings noted.*

R. T. Allen, *Beyond Liberalism: The Political Thought of F. A. Hayek & Michael Polanyi*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1998. Pp. x+ 266. ISBN 1-56000-355-3.

## 1. Freedom Dissected

What are the conditions of a viable liberalism? Richard Allen's *Beyond Liberalism* argues that it has to be conservative, be "passionately held as ...a religious faith," and should assign the human individual "unique value" (p. 12).<sup>1</sup> Polanyi's liberalism is shown as going quite some way towards meeting these conditions, but only the Christian conservatism of Edmund Burke and Aurel Kolnai satisfies all three. (Oddly, Kolnai is hardly mentioned in the body of Allen's book, and for this reason his ideas will take no part in this review.)

Some readers, this one included, may wonder where exactly Allen's sympathies lie. Interchanging the locutions "conservative liberalism" and "liberal conservatism," and choosing the title *Beyond Liberalism* suggest that *conservatism* rather than liberalism may be what he really approves of. The thought is reinforced when he subsequently enunciates his thesis that *classical liberal* analysis of liberty is self-destructive, requiring to be transformed into a "conservative" account (p. 41). Freedom is endangered today by the breakdown of common history and agreement on "natural moral laws" (p. 42).

*Beyond Liberalism* is a discussion in three parts, the first dealing with liberty's image in *classical* liberalism. A feature of such liberalism, as depicted by Allen, is the attempt to define *general* liberty in *abstract* fashion, committed to so doing by virtue of its elevating liberty to the supreme political good and correspondingly denouncing infringement of it as the worst political evil. (His claim about freedom as *summum bonum* of classical liberals is disputable, John Locke for example valuing life, liberty and property equally, while utilitarians James Mill and Bentham, and probably John Stuart Mill, subordinately value liberty as the way to happiness.)

Conceptions of liberty considered by Allen under the head of "classical liberalism" are principally Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty, and Friedrich Hayek's idea of liberty as *Reichstaat* or constitutional order. Berlin's suggestion is that negative and positive freedoms (summarily defined as "freedom from" and "freedom to") are qualitatively different, the first representing the general condition of being left alone to live as one chooses consistent with neighbours enjoying the same right, the other equating to self-mastery.

Allen argues against Berlin that the two supposed different types of liberty are in truth “inseparable aspects of” it (p. 17). All forms of liberty comprise these two, have a negative element and a positive. Free to act or live in some specified way, you are free *from* interference in that respect; each implies the other. The primary freedom, however, is that of doing “certain things ...and the negative can be defined and understood only as noninterference with it” (p. 137).

If, as Allen claims, all forms of liberty have this bipartite “from-to” constitution, what forms are there? His classification and characterization is complex, so much so that some readers may judge his efforts on this score as finical scholasticism, obscuring not elucidating. But this reviewer rates it a most useful analytical device, well adapted to avoiding conflation, counteracting vagueness, and rigorously studying the subject. Within Allen’s commodious arrangement are interpersonal/intrapersonal (civil/psychological) liberties, general liberty/specific liberties, and liberty of wider/narrower extent (more or less of a given freedom). There are also individual/corporate/communal forms of interpersonal liberty, Allen believing classical liberal thinkers (in contrast to Burke and Polanyi) have typically associated freedom with individuals. Corporations and communities liberals have not regarded as bearers of liberty as such, reducing ascriptions of liberty to them to statements about liberty enjoyed by their individual members. Allen for his part believes groups and corporate bodies may provide their members with more or less freedom and, “like individuals, can be free or coerced, and more or less free, with regard to public authorities, other groups and associations, and individuals” (p. 35).

From another standpoint, influenced by Brenkert’s *Political Freedom*, Allen delineates “five notions of liberty” (p. 41) which are not an internal division of liberty into different types (as above) but broad interpretations or understandings of freedom. *Conservative liberty* (exemplified in Burke, Tocqueville, Oakeshott), the only viable notion of liberty so far as Allen is concerned, envisages traditional rights and liberties counterchecking arbitrary exercise of power over society. Freedom is not a domain of non-interference but one of “reciprocal rights and obligations”; unsusceptible to abstract definition one gets to know it through “actual and prescriptive rights and duties” conveyed by tradition (p. 42). *Classical liberal freedom*, recall, is distinguished by its *abstract definition* of the term and its advocacy of an equal “general freedom to live as one pleases” (p. 43). Other views are *libertarian* or *individualist radical freedom* (Tom Paine, Jeremy Bentham, Robert Nozick) combining freedom in the classical liberal sense with minimal law, government, and tradition; *collectivist radical freedom* (Rousseau, Jacobins, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Marcuse), used by people to collectively define themselves and their way of life; and *welfarist freedom* aimed at empowerment.

A major argument of the book is against classical liberalism with Hayek the principal exemplar (although, as emerges below, his position is quite eclectic). His definition of freedom in *The Constitution of Liberty and Law, Legislation and Liberty* (Allen persistently miscalls it *Law, Liberty and Legislation*) is along negative lines as the opportunity to use personal knowledge for personal purposes, *uncoerced*. The basic connotation is absence of *coercion*; freedom existing where no threat of harm forces a person to serve another’s purposes, in contrast to forced labour, extortion and blackmail. This definition strikes Allen as doubly deficient, covering neither “all cases of definite coercion nor all cases of deprivation of liberty” (p. 51). One confuting example of several he cites concerns a prisoner so manacled as to be unable to move his limbs. Obviously unfree, he may nevertheless encounter no threat nor be forced to serve another’s purposes. Blackmail, another counter-case of Allen’s, is coercive without invariably depriving its objects of liberty. When Hayek thinks as a pure classical liberal he seeks “a general set of conditions which constitute liberty or its absence” and which is capable of universal application (p. 54), a project Allen deems futile. It is more instructive, Allen considers,

“to speak of freedoms rather than freedom in general, and thus of the ways in which given persons are free or not free” (p. 57). (Perhaps. Yet specific freedoms presuppose a generic one of which they are varieties. Allen seems to operate with an outdated “essentialist” idea of definition rather than a stipulative one.)

Allen’s account progressively reveals that Hayek has no single stance on liberty. Besides searching for a general definition of it, he resolves freedom into specific types (rights, competences or immunities) among which are legal protection of property ownership, enforcement of contract, “legal status as a protected member of the community, immunity from arbitrary arrest, the right to work ... and the right to move” about (p. 57). Citizens of a free society are envisaged as acting unhindered within private spheres demarcated by general rules and protected by threat of state coercion. As a further strand, Hayek defines liberty as subjection to laws that are known, predictable, and general in the sense of applying to all, laws excluding certain actions while prescribing none. The trouble is that such laws - collectively constituting Hayekian rule of law - fail to assure citizens of freedom by eliminating arbitrary interference, “for one may be free” from such “interference by being subject to *regular* interference” (p. 63). A good point. Islamic Sharia law might conceivably satisfy Hayek’s conditions (known, predictable, general) but could never ground a free Hayekian society. While conceding that rule of law is as secure a “legal framework for liberty” (p. 64) as can be hoped for, the foregoing problems demonstrate to Allen that *formal* attributes of law (generality and the like) constitute no sufficient condition for freedom under the law. *Substantive* (material) liberties or rights, independent of the rule of law as such, have to be considered when it comes to determining if actual regulation of different spheres of social life goes beyond what people require to act freely.

In chapter 4, “The Tacit Dimensions of Liberty,” a title redolent with Polanyi, we have Allen contending that freedom involves “a certain relativity” since, “for practical purposes, a people is free if, on the whole, they feel free” even if other people look on their laws and customs as unduly restrictive (p. 67). (How “relative”? - a population under Sharia law might consider itself free.) Liberty is in Allen’s assessment largely an object of *tacit understanding*, arising from experience of living in liberty, coupled “with a focal and explicit group of important specific liberties such as several property, immunity to arbitrary arrest, and freedom of movement, occupation, worship, and speech” (pp. 67-8). This recalls Burke’s image of liberty, to which Allen believes the arguments of Hayek and Polanyi lead. A particular concern of Burke is to show that preservation of a free society may in times of crisis dictate temporary suspension of basic liberties, as for example “security from imprisonment without public trial” (p. 68). This proposition imparts some sense to freedom being tacitly understood, as does the fact of law’s always having “indeterminate margins” which, as Allen remarks, appears to contradict the possibility of protection for freedom by the rule of law (p. 69). Duties not to obstruct the police and to assist them cannot be articulated in detail. Again, law must contain vague prohibitions if governments are to be able to respond to emergencies that threaten lives, liberties and property. Liberties may collide in unexpected ways, rights cannot be exhaustively enumerated, events are often unpredictable. These are further respects in which freedom is tacit. In Burkean spirit Allen argues that even if salient features of a system of liberty can be abstractly stated, lacunae and limitations must exist, to be dealt with by experts and lay people taking specific decisions in concrete situations as need arises, heedful of custom. The inference is “that knowledge of liberty is primarily the lived knowledge of liberty [an “unspecifiable art of practising it”] embodied in specific institutions and practices, which cannot be abstractly codified and applied elsewhere” (p. 71).

Burke presages Polanyi’s view that freedom is grounded on tacit interpretation of constitutional rules of free societies, “formulations of liberal principles derive their meaning from” diffuse and tacit knowledge of freedom, freedom depending “upon the presence and accredited authority of the liberal tradition” (p. 72). These

are conditions for understanding and, *a fortiori*, realising freedom. (It is of interest that several Hayek passages cited by Allen (pp. 73-4, 78) chime with these insights of Burke and Polanyi.)

Rather than attempt to generally and formally define freedom as an abstract idea, Burke and Polanyi produce a “*workable*” idea of it connected to “practical experience of an actual system of specific and concrete competences and immunities” (p. 75). Contrasting classical liberalism’s abstract individual deciding his life for himself, doing as he pleases, “conservative” liberals focus on real individuals in concrete social worlds. What such individuals recognize as freedom, its constituents and scope, depends on the traditions in which they have been raised. Their freedom concerns, not choice of private lifestyle but, opportunities to participate in traditional inherited ways of life.

As Allen sees it “the valid core of liberalism is an account of certain competences and immunities which have become recognised and established within the European world and can be enjoyed in similar circumstances” (p. 78). There is a good deal of Hayek in this, and Allen congratulates him for seeing that “two fundamental presuppositions of liberty are the Rule of Law ...and [the] ...presumption that everything is permitted which is not specifically prohibited” (p. 78).

## 2. Freedom Valued

Those are features of “The Nature of Liberty,” Part 1 of Allen’s book. Its second Part, “The Value of Liberty,” examines why liberty, largely understood in terms of competences and immunities enunciated by Hayek, is so desirable. Following chapters on von Mises and Popper (I say something about Popper below), Allen returns to Hayek, examining his main argument for freedom and its sustaining institutions and just rules, an argument from their beneficial effects of peace and prosperity. It is utilitarianism along the lines of David Hume, evaluating social orders rather than individual acts or specific rules.

Hayek’s notion of utility is seen as *transcending* itself. How so? Because his “rules of just conduct and liberty itself” are *necessary* rather than disposable or optional means for achieving “human well-being,” with the upshot that these rules and liberty become “almost ...inherently valuable” (p. 122). (Query: in the present context “almost” means “*not* inherently valuable”; does the negative exclude transcendence?) Utilitarianism for Allen is seriously defective, not least because attaining benefits from some social structure requires that it be valued “not for those benefits, but for itself,” the benefits arriving not through being aimed at but as unintended consequences (p. 123). (I find the argument less than cogent; exceptions spring to mind. Technology seems exempt from it (automobiles, electricity), as does an institution such as democracy, likewise an activity such as Smith’s jogging for an improved sense of well being notwithstanding her dislike of the exertion itself.)

Two thirds of the way through the volume, Polanyi becomes the centre of attention.<sup>2</sup> His point of departure combines freedom of science with a realization that liberty cannot be securely based on utilitarianism, the utility of science - technology - being a side-effect of free science. Polanyi’s foundations of science are moral, as are his grounds for freedom in its various main social forms, his interest lying in liberty for self-dedication to truth, justice, charity and other transcendent ideals or self-justifying ends. Allen takes a similar view of liberty as resting “upon moral foundations, of self-restraint and the practice of justice, which cannot be motivated by regarding them merely as means.” Justice as respect for others’ rights has to be accepted as

“good and binding in itself, apart from what results from it” (p. 162).

Polanyi designates this as “public liberty,” meaning free choices by people to join in pursuit of “common purposes that are aims in themselves” (p. 154). He contrasts it against “private liberty” to pursue one’s own purposes in ways of one’s choosing, consonant with the same right for others. Liberty “for self-dedication, not that for doing as one likes” is fundamental for Polanyi (p. 162). So classical liberals to the contrary, liberty is no *summum bonum*; its value deriving instrumentally from proving efficacious for truth and other ideals. Allen refers to this as liberty (and classical liberalism) transcending itself, freedom to do “only that which has a value that transcends individual likings and dislikings” (p. 165). This self-dedicated public liberty has a moral right to exist, is “the only defensible liberty” (p. 171). Obligations inhere in it: to groups sustaining enterprises to which individuals have chosen to dedicate themselves, to the enterprises and their ends. It is liberty embedded in tradition. Social rather than individual, Polanyi’s public freedom is set in, depends on, and is essential to the workings of, *spontaneously* formed social orders of science, scholarship, law, art, religion, and free political discussion, the distinction between spontaneous and corporate social orders, a particularly interesting facet of Polanyi’s social theory, being only briefly mentioned by Allen.

### 3. Freedom Founded

Part 3, Allen gives over to “The Foundations and Presuppositions of Liberty.” Arguing first that not all aspects of social life are based on contract, most indeed are unchosen, Allen proceeds to Hayek’s image of the Great Society as *cosmos*, opposite of *taxis*, terms with the same connotations as Polanyi’s “spontaneous” and “corporate” orders respectively. The Great Society has an indefinite and open membership with many *abstract* relations, people interacting on a functional, impersonal basis, in most cases never meeting (e.g. relations between producers and buyers of their goods from retailers). Dealings are typically conducted in compliance with abstract and general rules applying to all relevant parties rather than dictated by personal obligations and loyalties.

Polanyi’s image of the free society, shaped by his analysis of the “republic of science,” differs appreciably from Hayek’s. Recall that Polanyi’s society relies on commitment to truth and to other transcendent ideals, embodied in and guiding development of a tradition of thought. The society has a General Authority expressed in general propositions and exercised by individuals as they interpret and apply propositions. Specialists explore “self-improvement” in its various forms (art, science, and the like) and pursue different excellences, influenced by traditional authority and seeking “creative self-renewal” (p. 193). Specialists’ ideas impinge on the general public. In this inclusive society and in its diverse spheres of excellence, tradition has authority and grounds authority as conditions of transmitting what “cannot be known by any single mind nor be known wholly explicitly” (p. 194).

Allen is again reminded of Burke. For Burke as for Polanyi, the purpose of the free society is not to protect the negative liberty of doing as we please but to allow members of groups and enterprises positive liberty to dedicate themselves to forms of “self-improvement.” (It is not entirely clear, in either Polanyi or Allen, whether “self-improvement” refers to activities of creative specialists or more broadly. Is it a case of specialists improving traditions of institutions and enterprises, of people improving themselves, of most members of society helping to enhance heritages, or what? Of course contributions to traditions of a free society tell us nothing about contributors’ moral qualities: distinguished scientists, philosophers, artists can be vicious or

virtuous. If Polanyi and Allen believe that most citizens of inclusive free societies are dedicated to bettering cultural heritages, they idealize. Overall I find Polanyi's writings on this particular topic too assertive, insufficiently explanatory.)

Polanyi's image of the free society lays greater emphasis on associations than does Hayek's; "a Society of societies" (p. 197) is Allen's happy phrase for it. Also Polanyi's society has distinctive beliefs and general positive aims, whereas Hayek's society has only one aim, self-preservation. What holds these free societies together? The "cement" in Hayek's Great Society is universal principles of justice, the tissue of social relations deriving from equal treatment of members according to those principles. There is no commanding authority, and citizens' purposes are diverse. By contrast, Polanyi's free society is cemented by the tradition of free discussion-*cum*-civil liberties "which its members develop by individual initiatives" (p. 205). Embodied in, protected and fostered by, free institutions of Parliament, courts and the press, principles of this traditional art of free discussion prescribe that cases be presented accurately, and adversaries be heard tolerantly. The principles depend on truth being accepted as real, an object of felt obligation and of love throughout society. (Further idealization by Polanyi?)

While Polanyi has little to say concerning differences between liberal traditions of free societies, Allen specifies some between England, America, Holland and Switzerland and reiterates his thought that a free society is cohered by dedication not to abstract freedom but to concrete freedoms incorporated in specific practices, laws and structures. "All freedom is freedom to do or be something determinate" (p. 207).

A further cement in free societies, noted by Allen rather than by Polanyi it would appear, is positive civic and moral duties or obligations. Liberals as a rule (Hayek is an exception) have dealt with duties of non-interference, assuming and ignoring the necessity of "a tradition of civility and a general respect for law" (p. 209). The tradition of freedom depends on ingrained moral beliefs about duties by which passions are restrained, for example beliefs that it is inherently, rather than instrumentally, correct not only to desist from unduly intruding in our neighbours' lives but to positively uphold respect for the law, set a good example to children as parents and teachers, aid citizens who have been insulted and attacked. Similarly, Allen ascribes government with positive duties to preserve laws, customs and structures that nurture "the moral life of the people," all "sane and efficacious policies are primarily conservative" (p. 210).

Something else that Allen rates as important to free societies' coherence is emotional solidarity, contrary to Popper and Hayek for whom allegedly it is part of fossilized tribalism. Informed by Max Scheler's fascinating studies, Allen explains the free society as founded on each member's possessing a general capacity for sympathy or fellow-feeling with any one he meets, "sharing in the emotions of others" (p. 218) and binding people together. Without this "sympathy other people would be mere things to us and their actions mere events" (p. 219). The main context of social life is not transient encounters with strangers but the small "circles of family, neighbourhood, parish, workplace, professional associations" (p. 220). Objects of suspicion for collectivists and individualists alike, these "little platoons" as Burke refers to them engender emotional bonds above and beyond "fellow feeling," each one in itself is a "community of feeling, of shared attachments, hopes, fears, joys and sorrows" (p. 220). (Another rose-coloured view: what of dysfunctional families; and of rivalry, lack of collegiality, petty jealousies and outsize ambitions in specialist societies, universities, professional associations? How many people these days enjoy their work? Allen concedes superficial conflict may occur, but argues there must be "underlying commitment" in small groupings for them to survive. Let it be pointed out to him that commitment can be pragmatic and opportunistic. The situation is more complex than he

believes; “platoons” may be divisive and rancorous.)

Allen commends Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* (chapter 7, §§ 4 and 5) for its discussion of “the emotional basis of society” in terms of “‘pure conviviality’ or companionship” (simple enjoyment of company), and its account of rituals as affirming a group’s transcendence of its individual members (p. 221). Adding to understanding of the free society’s “felt solidarity,” Polanyi stresses emotional commitments to its continuance, laws, traditions, associations. “Bonds of emotional unity,” never part of totalitarian states, emerge spontaneously and persist traditionally in free societies (p. 223). (Could they also be part of *unfree* societies, for example medieval Europe and imperial China?)

Allen’s affirmation of traditions and emotional bonds cementing free societies is subsequently qualified by this comment: “Looking back on the twentieth century, we can see the vast damage done to European civilisation by restless and uprooted emotions. Rapid change, industrialisation, and the decline of religious belief have left men without the old patterns and sureties” (p. 225). The basis of our free societies has evidently been weakened. He looks at nationalism as one attempt to fill the heart devoid of traditional attachments, but a failure. (*Traditional* attachments and antipathies, especially those of religion, inspire much nationalism. Allen’s references to tradition are invariably positive, not mentioning how many are and have been authoritarian, intolerant, and adverse to liberty. A further point: if standards for judging what is socially desirable are tradition-dependent as Allen seems to imagine, on what basis if any are good and bad traditions to be discriminated? Are we in the mire of relativism?)

A crucial issue for Allen turns out to be this: “The appeal of revolutionary collectivism has declined dramatically, but the underlying rejection of the world will manifest itself in new ways [often violent], ...unless some proper emotions towards man and Nature are revived or implanted. The only defence for human dignity and liberty is a rightly ordered set of emotions which will give men the strength and patience to live, endure, and act” (p. 226). What then is the answer? Part of Allen’s is to urge support for conservative liberalism as the only viable liberalism, maintaining the traditional fabric of society while cautiously extending inherited liberties and permitting their positive use to pursue values presupposed as real and knowable. There is for Allen a more fundamental question: why should the individual receive respect and be permitted freedom? He agrees with Scheler that nowhere in modern thought can a conception of the individual as uniquely valuable be found. In particular Allen finds no satisfactory answer in Polanyi who makes liberty for self-dedication valuable with reference to transcendent ideals, so “the value of the individual lies in his service of those ideals, and, consequently, in what he produces” (p. 234). A conception of the individual as unique and inherently valuable such as liberty (and liberalism) require may be found in theology. R. G. Collingwood recognized this, saying “‘The real ground for the “liberal” or “democratic” devotion to freedom was religious love of a God who set an absolute value on every individual human being”” (p. 235). Liberalism took its conception of freedom from Christianity without providing it new grounds, so Allen claims. But because liberalism was shaped by Christian doctrine which affirms “the ultimate and inherent value of the” human individual, and has been sundered from this source, “Whence can come the emotion and faith to sustain liberty in the future?” (p. 237).

This in Allen’s mind is the major problem facing contemporary free societies: “What deep convictions can sustain them in the trials to come ...?” (p. 238). Collingwood to the contrary, Allen contends religious faith cannot be *used* to support the liberal order. Religion must be held as intrinsically true and important, God’s existence and justice as convictions. Polanyi saw his own writings as removing obstacles to “a rebirth of religious faith” (p. 239). He “thought that perhaps only a revival of religious faith and the Christian

understanding of man and the world could be the ultimate basis of a free and orderly society, yet he himself, like many others today, could not personally take that step. “That” writes Allen “seems to me the position we are in. ...It remains, in my opinion, to take the final transpolitical step to the full-blown Christian politics of the archetypical conservatism of Edmund Burke” (p. 241).

#### 4. Assessment

Commencing this section, I want to sing the praises of *Beyond Liberalism*. Quite simply, it is a splendid book; continually illuminating and thought provoking, I have learned a great deal from it. Erudition combines with razor sharp conceptual analysis in Allen’s study of fascinating thinkers. His interpretation of the leading lights - Hayek and Polanyi - is careful and convincing; the writing crisp, clear and leavened with wry humour. Sample this: “It is ironic that the pressure of public opinion, which worried Mill, was weakening in its extent just as Mill thought it was becoming unbearable. For it was quite possible to conduct many an ‘experiment in living’ in London if the parties were discrete about it: Maida Vale was built just for that purpose” (p. 155). Another instance: “To these are to be added other rights such as ones to privacy and secrecy (i.e., immunities to being watched and spied upon, now a dead letter as far as the tabloid press in Britain is concerned)” (p. 60).

Liberals (and others), Allen is right in saying, have been inattentive to traditions, even downright hostile to them. There is something in his critique of highly abstract political philosophizing, and his call for traditions to be included in analyses of freedom and of political systems is good sense. But it is one thing to criticize theory for abstractness and another to avoid such theory. For example, Allen on the subject of intrinsic value appears to operate with an abstract philosophical theory (as at p. 209) unless he thinks that values respected as intrinsic in the West have (and justifiably have) a different status elsewhere.

Turning negative now, I confess to having problems with Allen’s ultimate *conclusion* which strikes me as unrealistic for contemporary liberal-pluralist democracies. Regardless of one’s feelings about secularization and multi-culturalism in our societies (Allen is no admirer of these developments) they have advanced so far that his conclusion - freedom as a value demands respect for individual uniqueness for which only Christianity can provide - is, in its last component at least, out of the question for many citizens.

Related to Allen’s invocation of Christianity in this context is his claim (based on Scheler) that no liberal thinker offers a case for the unique value of each human individual. Is the denial correct? What of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* with its chapter “Individuality as one of the elements of human well being,” urging individuals to develop distinctive attributes? He quotes Wilhelm von Humboldt approvingly:

‘the end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole;’ that, therefore, the object ‘towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow-men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development’.<sup>3</sup>

Popper is another thinker who, like Mill, insists upon the moral value of concrete individuals. The flavour of his thinking is conveyed in his representation of the teaching of his idol, Socrates: “the human individual ...[is]



an end in himself,” “there is nothing more important in our life than other individual men. ... It is your reason that makes you human; ...that makes you a self-sufficient individual and entitles you to claim that you are an end in yourself.”<sup>4</sup>

It needs to be said that Popper is not well interpreted by Allen. A case in point is when he suggests Popper’s only alternative to an “unqualifiedly Open” society “is a ‘closed’ [or] ... ‘tribal’ one” (p. 185). Read Popper carefully and you see he locates open and closed societies at opposite ends of the spectrum with many intermediate possibilities. Allen envisages Popper’s open society as “open to any criticism and any change ... It cannot allow itself to have a secure faith in itself, nor a solid core which is not up for negotiation” (p. 181; cf. pp. 197, 205). This is not Popper’s view. His *Open Society* makes a case for rationalism over irrationalism, one that ultimately depends on *faith* in and commitment to humanitarianism (equality, freedom, individualism, and the like) and a dogmatic renunciation of violence. Serving this faith, rationalism is favoured at the expense of violence for settling conflicts. The open society is not without faith.

One of the few friendly things Allen has to say about Popper, buried in an endnote, is that he “rightly sees relativism as the principal intellectual malady of the age” (199 n. 14) - not just “a malady” but “the” chief one. One would expect Allen to discuss such a grave problem in detail. To the contrary, as we saw earlier, he actually endorses “a certain relativity” in the notions of freedom and coercion so that “for practical purposes, a people is free if ...they feel free, even though they may ...live under ...laws and customs which another people would find highly restrictive” (p. 67), freedom relativized to collective outlook. Allen seems unsure about where he stands, elsewhere implying universals, referring to a definite “valid core of liberalism” (p. 78) and describing Hayek’s rules of just conduct as necessary to human well being. What if such rules are absent from a society whose citizens nevertheless “feel free”? Are they free? Allen expresses belief at another place in universal moral laws, but conceding that with one hand he takes it back with the other, saying the content of these laws is socially variable, which effectively means moral validity is socially variable and relative. The topic is pregnant with irony in that Popper, for whom Allen has little time, is relentlessly hostile to relativism, while Polanyi is arguably an unwitting relativist. I lack space to document the case concerning Polanyi, but it is circumstantially significant that two of our era’s leading cognitive relativists - Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend - were powerfully affected by Polanyi’s analysis of relations between scientific theories and between the worldviews of scientists and other groupings, helping inspire their doctrine of incommensurability.

Refer again to Mill since Allen also misinterprets him. Allen considers that at the commencement of *On Liberty* Mill “simply set aside inner liberty, as the freedom of the will, as an [sic.] pseudo-problem” (p. 33). Mill does no such thing. He says, correctly, such freedom is no part of the subject of the book. But elsewhere “inner liberty” is a genuine problem of utmost importance for Mill, spilling much ink on it in his *A System of Logic* and his *Autobiography*. Mill serves to rebut a repeated claim by Allen that classical liberals want freedom for people to do as they please (pp. 195, 231), “to do as one likes just because one likes it” (p. 235). The tenor of Mill’s *On Liberty* is otherwise, proposes freedom for people to grow in Periclean (not wanton Alcibiadean) manner, developing moral, emotional, intellectual, and practical capacities and endowments. People may abuse freedom but Mill does not approve it, is no supporter of “do as you please.” (The same spirit - responsible exercise of freedom - suffuses the liberal texts of Locke, Humboldt, Popper and most other great liberal thinkers known to me.)

Often citing (pp. 153-4, 156, 165, 190ff, 201ff.) Polanyi's social analysis of science - the Republic of Science model - Allen is unaware that doubts have been cast on its contemporary relevance. Ravetz's *Scientific Knowledge and Its Social Problems* forcefully argues the character of science has changed since World War II. Science has been "industrialized," its research projects have become large scale, capital intensive, and linked to commercial exploitation. Scientific work is plagued by problems of quality control, and is directed by extra-scientific organizations in charge of funding, scientists having lost the autonomy and freedom that Polanyi fought so hard to preserve.<sup>5</sup> If Ravetz's argument is granted (being well informed and amply documented) it may not disqualify Allen from using Polanyi's "Republican" model to *analogically explicate* the inclusive free society but, anachronistic, the model's intellectual *support* for that society is slight.

Allen's attitude to what Polanyi styles "private liberty" calls for comment.

And what we are to be free to do can principally be only that which has a value that transcends individual likings and dislikings. Any other freedom is worthless by definition. The liberty that matters is one of self-dedication, a liberty that can claim a moral right to exist and be exercised. There can be no moral right to live irresponsibly or immorally (p. 165).

Must "private liberty," not dedicated to some ideal end, be worthless and, by implication, irresponsible, even immoral? I would answer that freedom to indulge one's "likings," not immorally but, in amoral or extra-moral ways is one of the free society's great attractions. Whether the object of a "liking" be driving in the countryside, watching movies, enjoying wine and food, holidaying overseas - dismissing the related freedoms as "worthless" seems puritanical. We are all of us in need of restorative pleasures, making freedom to enjoy oneself desirable and worth protecting. The freedom has limits to be sure, but life without it would be colourless and austere. It has been said that "Without the 'right to be left alone', to shut out on occasion the prying eyes and importunities of both government and society, other political and civil liberties seem fragile."<sup>6</sup> Another point: if, as Allen insists, our freedom is principally "to do only that which has a value that transcends" personal likings (p. 165) then by the same token freedom for profit-making in the capitalist economy is another mere "worthless freedom." Well Polanyi sees it differently in *The Logic of Liberty* essays where market orders are prominent spontaneous orders alongside science and common law, and involve *public* liberty (Allen to the contrary at p. 156). Allen says little about market freedom, effectively deprecating it as *outré* freedom with no ideal or moral end.

Since Bentham, liberals have commonly regarded democracy as an indispensable protection for liberty, bestowing citizens with power to counteract their rulers. Competing political parties and periodic elections with universal suffrage allow citizens to vote out governments, inhibiting abuse of power. This appreciation of democracy is never mentioned by Allen or Polanyi.

Typographical and spelling mistakes include "R. A. Nesbit" (p. 14) for Nisbet, "utilitarianism" for utilitarianism (p. 118), "consequence" for consequent (p. 140), "late" for later (p. 173); there is a solecism "be not be" (p. 193), and a number of omissions including "be" (p. 35), "d" (p. 41), "be" (p. 43), "of" (p. 60), "of" (p. 231). On a point of historical detail, Allen's claiming the "rise of nominalism ...resulted in a rejection of the whole idea of Natural Law" (p. 140) seems falsified by the likes of Locke and Boyle who coherently combined conceptual nominalism with natural law ethics.

*Beyond Liberalism* should prove of considerable interest to able undergraduates, to postgraduates and

academics interested in Hayek or Polanyi, freedom and the liberal tradition.

## Notes

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1. All references are to *Beyond Liberalism* unless otherwise indicated.
2. Primary sources for Allen's coverage of Polanyi include *Knowing and Being*, *The Logic of Liberty*, *Personal Knowledge*, *Science, Faith and Society*, and *The Tacit Dimension*.
3. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government* (London: Dent, 1968), pp. 115-16.
4. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 5th ed., vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 190.
5. J. R. Ravetz, *Scientific Knowledge and its Social Problems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).
6. "The surveillance society", *The Economist*, May 1st, 1999, vol. 351, number 8117, p.17.