

POLANYI'S ISTHMUS:
PASSAGEWAY OR PERMANENT DWELLING?

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Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state
A being darkly wise and rudely great.
— Alexander Pope

Abstract

We might think of the Polanyi Society as inhabiting an isthmus, a narrow land bridge between two greater land masses. One of these larger land masses can be characterized as the variations of reductionism: naturalism, positivism (empiricism), and materialism. Polanyi acerbically polemicized against these, and he strongly warned that to embrace such reductionism would lead to civilizational suicide. Since its inception, the Polanyi Society has had a strong consensus that movement toward reductionism is simply wrong, out of the question. But while movement from the isthmus toward naturalism and the like has been ruled out, there is no consensus about movement toward the opposite land mass, not even about what it is or whether it exists. In generic terms, this possible land mass could be called Transcendence; for what is probably a minority of Polanyi Society members, the greater land mass—and its beckoning telos is believed to be the reality depicted by Christian faith.

What Polanyi wrote and personally believed about the possibilities of Transcendence has brought some lively debates to the Society. But the Society's consensus about where we must not go has not led to anything like a consensus of

where (if anywhere) we should go. While we convivially inhabit the isthmus, the issue continues to color and inform our discussions and output: Is our isthmus a passageway or a permanent dwelling?