

CHAPTER TWELVE

MAPPING THE TERRITORIES OF A POLANYIAN ETHIC

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As many have recognized, Polanyi's post-critical project represents his answer to the question, "Why Did We Destroy Europe?"¹ To summarize that answer too blithely, Polanyi argues that we destroyed western liberal culture because, under the influence of positivistic philosophies, we decoupled moral passion from commitment to the reality of moral values such as truth, goodness, or justice. This disconnect allowed moral passions to be directed in destructive ways, resulting most notably in the violent, authoritarian regimes of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini. In light of his diagnosis, Polanyi says that ethics needs to "catch up with the pathological forms of morals due to the intensification of morality."² Despite his moral motives and ethical charge, however, the definitive account of Polanyian ethics has yet to be written.³ To be fair, the topic has not been entirely ignored. Paul Nagy has called Polanyi a moral philosopher in the Aristotelian tradition, Walter Gulick has devoted a section of the Polanyi Reader to the topic of morality, and some, including Phil Mullins, have written on the topic.⁴ Still most scholarly attention has gone

¹Michael Polanyi, "Why Did We Destroy Europe?" *Studium Generale*, 23 (1970): 909-916.

² Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 3.

³ Diane Yeager suggests some plausible reasons for why ethicists have not plumbed Polanyi's work to the degree it deserves in her "Confronting the Minotaur: Moral Inversion and Polanyi's Moral Philosophy," *Tradition and Discovery* Vol. 29, No. 1 (2002-2003): 23.

⁴ Paul Nagy, "Philosophy in a Different Voice: Michael Polanyi on Liberty and Liberalism." *Tradition and Discovery* Vol. 22, no. 3 (1995-1996): 17-27 and Walter Gulick, *Recovering Truths: A Comprehensive Anthology of Michael Polanyi's Writings*. Available at <http://polanyisociety.org/PolanyiReader/PolanyiReader-PrelimCmmt-3-4-23-final.pdf>.

to work in economics, political theory, scientific method, religious thought, epistemology, and ontology—not ethics.

This essay will not, however, develop a comprehensive, systematic Polanyian ethic. Instead, my goal is more modest, i.e., to provide a map that can guide those who desire to develop such an ethic.⁵ In order to do that, I first review some of what has been written about Polanyi and ethics. Next, in keeping with the map metaphor, I “scout out” two “territories” by summarizing relevant parts of Polanyi’s work and then identifying their ethical implications. These “territories” represent topics that any systematic ethic must address, either tacitly or explicitly: a moral vision and an account of moral agency.⁶ By moral vision, I mean the vision of the good life assumed, often tacitly, in any formal ethic. Such a vision reflects assumptions about the nature of the world, the place of humanity in the natural and social worlds, what counts as a fulfilling, authentically human life, and so on. Any ethic must also give account of the moral agent by discussing human capacities of thought and emotion, moral development, the limits and possibilities of action, and so on. That such a structure can enlarge efforts to develop a more comprehensive Polanyian ethic becomes evident as we consider what others have said explicitly about Polanyi and ethics, writings that have largely focused on only one “region” within one of these two “territories.”

Polanyi and Ethics in the Literature: Focus on Epistemology

As noted above, Polanyi and Polanyians have written about many topics that impinge on ethics, but engaging all of them in depth would require a book-

⁵ Polanyi sometimes talks about the relative value of maps in Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 29-30. British philosopher Mary Midgely likewise uses the metaphor of physical maps to argue that we need to use multiple maps as we negotiate life. See her *Science and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 112-114. Her work has many affinities with Polanyi’s, but so far as I can determine has never engaged his work.

⁶My territories are inspired by Christian ethicist James M. Gustafson’s basepoints, which he defines as “the fundamental requirements for a comprehensive and coherent account of theological ethics” in his *Ethics and Theology*, Vol. 2 of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 143. My territories are not identical to his basepoints, although I think they are compatible. For lack of space, I do not address an additional territory, practical outcomes. A moral vision has to be put into action. Raw material for Polanyi’s own applications can be found in his writings on economics and politics. That material, along with the vast secondary literature on those topics lies beyond the scope of this essay.

length treatment and so I focus on essays that explicitly link Polanyi to ethics. In examining this set of literature, it becomes apparent that the overwhelming trend has been to focus on the implications of Polanyi's epistemology for ethics. To be sure, there are places thinkers overlap, complement each other, and even conflict, but all share the conviction that Polanyi's epistemology is the launching pad for any Polanyian ethic.

In an early essay, Carl J. Friedrich argues that Polanyi's epistemology provides a way to rehabilitate natural law.⁷ Walter Conn asserts that his account of tacit knowing is "Polanyi's single most important contribution to ethical thought."⁸ David Jenkins examines how Polanyi's epistemology plays out in his social and political writings.⁹ Harry Prosch draws from Polanyi's account of tacit integrations to argue that "morality...derives its power to carry us away from the same sort of transnatural integrations that operate in art and religion."¹⁰

Charles McCoy argues that Polanyi's epistemology allows the discipline of ethics to avoid a number of modern distortions: a tendency to perfectionism; extensive reliance on rules, codes, or principles; moral relativism; rationalism; and individualism, as well as promoting liberation. He later reaffirms and expands on these ideas.¹¹ John Rothfork argues that Polanyi's account of knowledge grounded in embodied action can keep postmodern thought from devouring itself.¹² Stefania Ruzsits Jha argues that Polanyi's epistemology promotes what she calls a "judicial attitude," i.e., one that strives to put universalizable principles into action.¹³ Mark R.

⁷ Friedrich, Karl. "Man, the Measure: Personal Knowledge and the Quest for Natural Law". In *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, eds. Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 91-110.

⁸ Walter Conn, "Michael Polanyi: The Responsible Person," *Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (1976): 32.

⁹ David O. Jenkins, "The Ethical Dimension of Personal Knowledge." Diss. Loyola University of Chicago. 1981.

¹⁰ Harry Prosch, "Polanyi's Ethics." *Ethics*, Vol. 82, no. 2 (January 1972): 91-113.

¹¹ Charles McCoy, "The Polanyian Revolution: Post-Critical Perspectives for Ethics," *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1991-1992): 37-39 and "Ethics for the Post-Critical Era: Perspectives from the Thought of Michael Polanyi," *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (2002-2003): 6-21.

¹² John Rothfork, "Postmodern Ethics: Richard Rorty and Michael Polanyi," *Southern Humanities Review*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 16-18.

¹³ Stefania Ruzsits Jha, *Reconsidering Michael Polanyi's Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 245.

Discher explores how Polanyi's epistemology can resolve a debate in moral philosophy between generalists and particularists.¹⁴

Douglas Adams and Phil Mullins explore the implications of Polanyi's epistemology for moral judgment.¹⁵ In a later essay, Mullins demonstrates how Polanyi's account of knowing evolves into an account of the emergence of living creatures and ultimately human agents.¹⁶ Walter Gulick uses Polanyi's understanding of perception and discovery to expand our understanding of a moral point of view.¹⁷ In a series of essays, Charles Lowney connects Polanyi's accounts of tacit knowing and emergence to ethics.¹⁸ My own work connects Polanyi's account of tacit knowing and its development to practical reasoning and moral development.¹⁹ Ellen Bernal argues that appreciation for Polanyian ways of knowing can improve ethical consultation in health care settings.²⁰ David Hoinski and Ronald Polansky see Polanyi's epistemology as able to counter the tendency toward the nihilism of the modern era.²¹

¹⁴ Mark R. Discher, "Polanyi's Epistemology of Science and Its Implications for a Problem in Moral Philosophy," *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (2002-2003): 49-59.

¹⁵ Douglas Adams and Phil Mullins, "Conscience, Tacit Knowledge and the Art of Judgment: Implications of Polanyi's Thought for Moral Reflection." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 66, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 34-45.

¹⁶ Phil Mullins, "Polanyian Agency and Some Links to MacMurray," *Appraisal*, Vol. 7, no. 3 (March 2009): 11-24.

¹⁷ Walter Gulick, "Virtues, Ideals, and the Convivial Community: Further Steps Toward a Polanyian Ethic." *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 30, no. 3 (2003): 40-51.

¹⁸ Charles Lowney, "From Science to Morality: A Polanyian Perspective on the Spirit and Letter of the Law," *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 36, no. 1 (2009-2010): 42-54; "Morality: Emergentist Ethics and Virtue for Itself," *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 36, no. 3 (2009-2010): 52-65; and "From Morality to Spirituality: Society, Religion, and Transformation," *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 37, no. 1 (2010-2011): 19-38.

¹⁹ Paul Lewis, "Practical Reasoning as Personal Knowing: Pedagogical Implications of Polanyi's Insights into the Development of the Moral Self," *The Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. 37 (2008): 122-138; "Teaching to Form Character: A Polanyian Analysis of Practical Reasoning". In *Knowing and Being: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Michael Polanyi*, ed. Tihamer Margitay (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp. 80-95; and "In Defense of Aristotle on Character: Toward a Synthesis of Recent Psychology, Neuroscience, and the Thought of Michael Polanyi," *Journal of Moral Education*, Vol. 41, no. 2 (June 2012): 155-170.

²⁰ Ellen Bernal, "Health Care Ethics Consultation: Personal Knowledge and Apprenticeship," *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 42, no. 4 (October 2016): 34-54.

²¹ Hoinski, David and Ronald Polansky. 2017. "The Modern Aristotle: Michael Polanyi's Search for Truth Against Nihilism". In *Contemporary Encounters with*

This emphasis on Polanyi's epistemology makes perfect sense as moral knowing is an important dimension of the moral life, one worth emphasizing in a culture that teeter-totters between moral skepticism and moral absolutism, with hints of moral inversion in the background. Because Polanyi's account of the complexity of human knowing and meaning making applies to all domains of life, it necessarily informs what I call the territories that any systematic ethic must address. Nevertheless, epistemology is only one area in one territory of a larger moral map. It is to those territories we now turn, first with what I call a vision of the good.

The First Territory: A Vision of the Good Life

There are many visions of a good life. For Aristotle, a good life is one lived in a polis that enables people to live up to their capacities.²² For a Thomist, a good life is friendship with God. For a Buddhist, a good life is freedom from the cycle of rebirth. For a neo-liberal capitalist, a good life is freedom to accumulate wealth. Polanyi's work as a physical chemist leads him to construe the good life as participation in a community of explorers committed to transcendent values that enable us to make contact with a reality that promises to reveal itself in ever new ways.

It is from his experience in the scientific community that Polanyi extrapolates what a good society looks like. Polanyi describes the scientific community as a "society of explorers" who are "dedicated to the pursuit of aims unknown to us".²³ He succinctly summarizes his view of that community by saying,

Science is governed by common beliefs, by values and practices transmitted to succeeding generations. Each new independent member of the scientific community adheres to this tradition, assuming at the same time the responsibility shared by all members for re-interpreting the tradition and, possibly revolutionizing its teachings.²⁴

This succinct statement serves as a set of clues for Polanyi's vision of the good life.

Ancient Metaphysics, eds. Abraham Jacob Greenstine and Ryan J. Johnson (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press), 181.

²² Of the works cited in the literature review, Nagy, Lewis, and Lowney, along with Hoinski and Polansky, see affinities between Polanyi and Aristotle, a topic that might be worth further development.

²³ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 85.

²⁴ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 85

Consider first common beliefs. The most basic belief shared by the scientific community, one without which the endeavor could not even get off the ground, is that there is “something there that can be understood.”²⁵ Correlative to that belief is the conviction that our knowledge can be true. As Polanyi says, “there can be no way of aiming at the truth unless you believe in it.”²⁶ Belief, for Polanyi, involves commitment or obligation to the reality of truth.²⁷

What keeps that commitment from devolving into wishful thinking or fideism is the structure, convictions, and mechanisms by which the scientific community operates. Polanyi characterizes that structure as polycentric, i.e., one that is coordinated or ordered spontaneously. In such a structure, the independent initiatives and findings of scientists working on their own problems end up adjusting to each other without any hierarchical authority imposing order on them.²⁸ That there is no hierarchical authority in the scientific community does not mean that there is anarchy, however, for authority in the scientific community exists in many forms. One form that it takes is professional standards that new members of the community are taught to indwell by their participation in the practices of the community under the guidance of mentors.²⁹ New members in the community thereby come to share the standards by which their work and that of others can be assessed, standards such as plausibility, intrinsic interest, accuracy, systematic importance, and originality.³⁰ These standards are then enforced by decisions made about what is published where, who is appointed to what positions, and who gets grants to fund their work.³¹ These mechanisms create overlapping competencies which enable scientists to develop both their own professional judgment and to adjust their work to that of their

²⁵ Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 44.

²⁶ Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society*, 70.

²⁷ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983), 87 and *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 63. Commitment is central to Polanyi’s understanding of what we might call the virtues of fairness and toleration for Polanyi says both presuppose a commitment to the existence of truth, a love for truth, an obligation to seek truth, and the capacity for doing so (see also his *Science, Faith, and Society*, 71 and 79-80).

²⁸ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 49-50.

²⁹ Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society*, 44-45.

³⁰ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 53-54.

³¹ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 56-58.

peers, thus leading to greater knowledge of whatever subject they are studying.³²

Second, consider freedom. Although Polanyi does not differentiate between personal or private freedom and public liberty in this summary of the workings of the scientific community, it is clear that one's personal freedom as a scientist is constrained by public freedom. Elsewhere, Polanyi defines private freedom as the freedom to be left alone or do what one wants. In contrast public liberty refers to the individual's freedom to benefit the community by sustaining the dynamic and polycentric orderings of society.³³

Finally, consider the responsibility to reinterpret—and even at times revolutionize—the traditions of scientific inquiry. The result of a spontaneously ordered polycentric community is what Polanyi calls “dynamic orthodoxy” in which those who submit to authorities in the community learn how to oppose accepted findings in light of new information.³⁴ Put differently, participants in the community dwell in the traditions, standards, and practices of the community in order to break out in ever new insights into reality.³⁵ Those shared beliefs in truth and reality identified earlier thus evoke and sustain the curiosity necessary to understand reality more fully. Put differently, for Polanyi, truth is a quest, a calling we exercise within the limits and possibilities of our embodiment and embeddedness.³⁶

What then does Polanyi infer about reality from his participation in the scientific community? I highlight two insights that are relevant to ethics.

³² Some might argue that Polanyi's account of the scientific community is too idealistic and romantic given concerns raised today about how corporations with their own interests at stake fund much scientific research and revelations about how investigators have manipulated data. Polanyi, however, is more realistic than my summary may make him seem. For one thing, he acknowledges that societies are not perfect (see, e.g., *Tacit Dimension*, 86; cf. *Personal Knowledge*, 224). Additionally, his own experience as someone whose work on adsorbtion was initially rejected and later vindicated validates this broad picture of science (see *Knowing and Being*, 87–96). At the least, his picture of the scientific community at its best names the standards by which we can—and still do—challenge the integrity of scientific studies.

³³ Michael Polanyi, “The Growth of Thought in Society,” *Economica*, Vol. 8, No. 31 (November 1941), 438; cf. Diane Yeager, “Rebuilding Responsible Freedom,” *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 47, no. 2 (2021): 21.

³⁴ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 55 and 70.

³⁵ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 195–202.

³⁶ Compare Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 321–324 and 379 with *Knowing and Being*, 133–134.

The first is that we will never be able to understand reality in its totality. At best, he says that “what we perceive is *an aspect of reality*, and aspects of reality are clues to yet boundless undisclosed and perhaps as yet unthinkable experiences.”³⁷ He makes this point elsewhere by famously saying that while cobblestones may be more “tangible” than abstract problems, the latter are more real “because we expect them to reveal themselves in unexpected ways in the future.”³⁸ Implicit in the claim that we can never fully understand reality is the sense that reality is multi-tiered, which is a second insight relevant to ethics.

Polanyi posits that reality is made up of many layers in which lower layers are more basic and make possible the complexity of higher layers. He makes this point in a variety of ways, most notably in his description of boundary conditions.³⁹ One analogy is writing. Books like this one consist of chapters, which are built on paragraphs, which are built on words, which are built on letters of the alphabet all organized by rules of syntax and grammar. Knowledge of the book as a whole cannot be predicted based on knowledge of a single word, or even paragraph, or chapter. Yet the book could not exist without the word; the book is dependent upon the lower level of the word even if the word does not control the meaning of the book. Polanyi makes a similar case for machines and ultimately for life itself.⁴⁰ Reality in all its complexity is emergent and that is why it promises to reveal itself in ever new ways and any “orthodoxy” must be dynamic.⁴¹

In sum, extrapolating from his experience as a scientist engaged in discovery, Polanyi argues that a good life is one lived in a society whose “whole purpose ... lies in enabling its members to pursue their transcendent obligations; particularly to truth, justice, and charity.”⁴² Such a society is made possible and sustained in part by commitment to these “transcendent” obligations and the conviction that there is a complex reality “out there,” or to borrow the title of Matthew B. Crawford’s 2015 book, a “world beyond

³⁷ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 79; emphasis his.

³⁸ Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*, 32-33.

³⁹ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 153-155.

⁴⁰ Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 153-155.

⁴¹ I deliberately avoid the topic of Polanyi’s contested understanding of evolution. For an example of the debates, see the exchanges between Walter Gulick, “That ‘Treacherous Footnote:’ Assessing Grene’s Critique of Polanyi,” *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 37, no. 2 (2010-2011): 55-60; Daniel Paksi’s response, “In Defense of Polanyi’s Understanding of Evolution,” *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2011-2012): 48-55 and Gulick’s reply, “On the Adequacy of Neo-Darwinism: A Reply to Daniel Paksi,” *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2011-2012): 45-57.

⁴² Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society*, 83 and *Personal Knowledge*, 220-222.

your head.”⁴³ Such a society is sustained by practices that enable its members to indwell and break out of its traditions when warranted by new information that is assessed by shared standards. It is a society in which personal freedom is exercised in the context of public liberty.

What then are the implications for ethics of this summary of Polanyi’s vision of a good life? I highlight three. First, in keeping with the centrality of beliefs to Polanyi’s work, any ethic that is Polanyian in spirit must be committed to the reality of moral truth, even if our knowledge of what is good and right is partial. This commitment to moral truth is especially crucial at times when competing claims to moral truth lead some to become skeptical of the existence of such truth and lead others to state and act on their moral convictions with dogmatic certainty. As Polanyi rightly realizes, without such commitment, the moral life becomes “but a convention,”⁴⁴ reduced to “congeries of historically influenced economic need.”⁴⁵ But for Polanyi, that conviction need not lead either to absolutism or subjective preference, as becomes apparent when we consider the other ethical implications of his vision of the good life.

In keeping with Polanyi’s understanding of reality, we can expect knowledge of good and right to emerge over time as we continue to analyze and reflect carefully on the problems we face. Such knowledge will be dynamic and so a Polanyian ethic will be characterized by a dynamic orthodoxy which stands by its convictions at the same time that it is willing to change those convictions when the evidence is sufficient for doing so. Put differently, a Polanyian ethic will be definite (able to say, “this is what is fitting now”) without being definitive (“this stance is the only one that is true in all cultures, places, and times”).⁴⁶ In Polanyian language, moral judgments will be made with universal intent (more on this in the next section).

Second, in keeping with Polanyi’s account of the scientific community, a Polanyian ethic will identify and promote the practices that build and sustain healthy communities, i.e., those that maintain a healthy balance between personal freedom and public liberty. It will promote the exercise of appropriate authority and resist authoritarianism in all areas of life: religious, political, economic, scientific, educational, etc. It will promote

⁴³ Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

⁴⁴ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 380.

⁴⁵ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 66.

⁴⁶ I borrow this language from Harmon Smith, my mentor at Duke University and a long-time colleague of Bill Poteat.

dynamic orthodoxy by encouraging a balance between commitment and humility, all fueled by curiosity about what might lie ahead.

Finally, in keeping with Polanyi's account of a tiered, emergent reality in which parts and wholes are interconnected, a Polanyian ethic will be attentive to systems, to the impact of parts on wholes and wholes on parts. As such it will be alert to the ways that social institutions and policies constrain and promote different goods. It will be alert to ways that natural and human systems interact. Considering that attentiveness, it will seek to alter systems in such a way as to promote the widest flourishing possible, a flourishing that is more akin to Aristotelian *eudaimonia* than modern utilitarianism.

In addition to a vision of the good life, every ethic presupposes, even if it does not make explicit, an anthropology, an account of the human person as moral actor. An account of agency makes assumptions about, minimally, the location of the agent and the various capacities of the agent. It is to that territory I now turn.

The Second Territory: The Moral Agent

Much that needs to be said about the location of the moral agent easily follows from the moral vision set out above. A Polanyian ethic recognizes that agents are embedded in a social world; at the very least, they are participants in scientific, professional, political, civic, and economic worlds. Individual agents are not only always already embedded in societies, but also the natural world of animate and inanimate objects. Agents do not stand above and apart from these worlds, but are part of them, influenced by and influencing them. There is a further aspect of embeddedness that we need to acknowledge as well: the embeddedness of the agent in a physical body.

As befits his attempt to overcome modern dualisms of subjective v. objective or body v. mind, Polanyi fully recognizes that human beings inhabit physical bodies, a point he makes most powerfully when he asserts

Our body is always in use as the basic instrument of our intellectual and practical control over our surroundings. Hence in all our waking hours we are subsidiarily aware of our body within our focal knowledge of our surroundings. *To be aware of our body in terms of the things we know and do is to feel alive. This awareness is an essential part of our existence as sensuous active persons.*⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 31 (emphasis his).

Our embodiedness both limits and creates possibilities for us. Among the most obvious limits are those that come with illness, injury, or aging. When we are sick, say with the flu, our lived world narrows to looking forward to the next dose of medicine, or the unpleasantness of a fever. With age, sight may dim and hearing become difficult. Apart from these frailties, there are other limits to human agency that come with our physical bodies. Vision, for example, is limited in that I can see objects only from a particular angle and only in certain wavelengths of light. To say that physical bodies limit us is not to say enough, however, for our embodiment also creates possibilities.

Our ability to see is made possible by our eyes, optic nerves, and visual cortex. Further, our ability to see can be enhanced by tools, such as eyeglasses, microscopes, telescopes, or the stories of others. Polanyi often discusses how tools, such as a stick used to probe a hole, extend our bodies and allow us to expand our knowledge.⁴⁸ Of course, we must realize that the physical roots of vision are themselves interconnected with circulatory, respiratory, muscular, digestive, and other systems that comprise the human body. Our abilities to extend our bodies via using tools thus emerges from our comprehensive embodiedness.

Mention of tools and their use takes us to the topic of human capacities, the first of which concerns our ability to know, which for Polanyi, as is well documented, operates with a from/to structure. This structure remains the same in all domains of knowing, whether scientific, religious, philosophical, artistic, or other. In all of them, we attend *from* bodily, technological, intellectual, and other tools we might have at our disposal *to* whatever objects we are examining, treating features of those objects as clues to a more comprehensive meaning, just as we might infer from the lines that comprise a drawing the figure of a duck or a rabbit.

Given the fact that knowing is a dynamic process more than a product (or at least as much a process as a product), we always have to make judgments about or appraise not only the clues to which we attend, but also our integrations of those clues into wholes or comprehensive entities.⁴⁹ Making judgments is not, however, simply a matter of following rules. As follows from the fact that all knowledge for Polanyi is tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge, rules ultimately fail us. To say this is not to say that rules have no value for they can guide our integrations. Nevertheless, at some point,

⁴⁸ See, for example, Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 55-63.

⁴⁹ For an extensive discussion of Polanyi on judgment and its implications for ethics, see Adams and Mullins, "Conscience, Tacit Knowledge", as well as Diane Yeager, "'The Deliberate Holding of Unproven Beliefs': Judgment Post-Critically Considered Judgment Post-Critically Considered," *The Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. 37 (2008): 96-121.

they become “part of our deepest commitments.”⁵⁰ Take for example, learning to play the piano. One must first learn “rules” for reading treble and bass clefs, for fingering the keys, and for using the pedals. Knowing the rules does not, however, guarantee that the piano player will be able to make music, i.e., develop one’s own interpretations of the written notes on the page. That happens only when the pianist has internalized the “rules” to the point that she does not have to concentrate on them explicitly while playing. In keeping with what we said above, at this point, the pianist has learned to make judgments about how to interpret and apply these rules over time in a community that is committed to the standards that define the community and that members of the community indwell.

This account so far may make Polanyi sound too rationalistic and so it is important to remember that for Polanyi knowing is always motivated. Drawing from Gestalt psychology, he characterizes human knowing as always seeking meaning, always integrating clues. Our knowing is not therefore dispassionate; it is motivated by a variety of what he calls intellectual passions of which he identifies three: selective, heuristic, and persuasive.⁵¹ As defined by Polanyi, selective passions direct our attention to one object over another. For Polanyi fact and value are therefore not competing entities for we do not attend to something unless we think it has value for or is relevant to our quest. Heuristic passions refer to our drive to discover meaning, to find patterns among the clues we are investigating. Persuasive passions motivate us to try to convince others of the rightness of our integrations. And because our integrations are limited by our own embeddedness and embodiedness, with the result that all knowledge is partial, we can only speak with universal intent. In doing so, we both assume that others can come to see what we perceive to be the case and are open to where such conversations take us.⁵²

Interestingly, Polanyi spends more time offering an account of intellectual passions than moral passions, although he alludes to the power of the latter when he says, “to comply with a code of morality, custom, and law, is to live by it in a far more comprehensive sense than is involved in observing certain scientific and artistic standards”⁵³ and “Ethics and religion are also [like the evocative power of art] forceful expressions of the imagination.”⁵⁴ For Polanyi, it is not the power of moral passion that worries him, it is the modern era’s penchant for moral inversion that occurs when

⁵⁰ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 61.

⁵¹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 132-202; especially 142-151.

⁵² See Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 203 and *Meaning*, 194-195.

⁵³ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 215.

⁵⁴ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 106.

our motivations to create a better society are divorced from belief that moral standards have any basis in reality.⁵⁵

Still, there are places where Polanyi clearly identifies the moral implications of his account of human agency. For example, he says that we indwell or interiorize moral theories like we indwell any theoretical framework.⁵⁶ Polanyi acknowledges, too, that our moral beliefs are arguably more prone to instability than other forms of belief.⁵⁷ Polanyi realizes that moral principles cannot be demonstrated scientifically or with certainty,⁵⁸ but instead function more like “rules of rightness,” which serve as a framework that makes things intelligible and provide a “rational way to achieve a purpose.”⁵⁹ Moreover, Polanyi notes that moral judgments are appraisals like other judgments. As such, “Thirst for righteousness has the same capacity for satisfying itself by enriching the world that is proper to intellectual passions. And like the artist and scientist, moral man strives to satisfy his own standards to which he attributes universal validity.”⁶⁰

To sum up this territory, the moral agent is embodied and embedded in a physical and social world. We come to know something by relying on the tacit as we attempt to discover connections between phenomena that will help us better understand the meaning of X, Y, or Z. The tacit that we rely on must issue from our bodies, our historical and cultural inheritances, our theories, prior knowledge, any variety of tools, or some combination thereof. Our knowing is always motivated or passionate, driven by this desire to find meaning and fueled by commitments to truth, justice, etc. Our passions can be misdirected, especially when divorced from any commitment to standards such as truth, beauty, or goodness. Our knowledge is always partial and evolving, but not subjective preference because our integrations are challenged and validated by a community of inquiry and practice.

⁵⁵ See Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*, 57 and *Meaning*, 28. Yeager, “Confronting the Minotaur,” offers the best analysis of Polanyi’s account of moral inversion to date. We should also note that while Polanyi largely decries the influences of secularization and rationalism on morality, he does acknowledge that they have been beneficial in many ways (see *Meaning*, 24-25).

⁵⁶ Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*, 57. In my terms, we indwell a moral vision.

⁵⁷ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 224.

⁵⁸ Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1951), 120-121.

⁵⁹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 331-333. See also the text of his lecture, “Rules of Rightness,” that Polanyi delivered as part of a series at the University of Chicago in 1954. The lecture, with additional commentary, was published in 2023 in *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 49, no.1: 4-38.

⁶⁰ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 214.

What then are implications of this analysis of agency for a Polanyian ethic? In keeping with the embodiedness and embeddedness of moral agents, I highlight two. First, an ethic that is Polanyian will not be individualistic. It will recognize that persons are interdependent participants in multiple societies that shape us and that we shape, thus highlighting our responsibilities to create a good society (see the first “territory”). Second, an ethic that is Polanyian will attend to human embodiment. It will be sympathetic to work in the sciences that help us better understand our bodies while resisting any reductionism that claims that knowledge of the body exhausts what it means to be human. At the same time, it will be attentive to both benefits and harms to bodies generated by different social practices, political policies, and technological interventions such as genetic engineering.⁶¹

With regard to Polanyi’s construal of human capacities, I highlight three implications for ethics. First, a Polanyian ethic will reject any attempt to oppose reason and emotion. Instead, it will treat these two capacities as interdependent, both contributing to a whole account of human reasoning. It will draw from work in the neurosciences that are coming to acknowledge that this old tendency to oppose reason to emotion is not sound at a biological level.⁶²

Second, a Polanyian ethic will acknowledge the possibilities and limits of centering an ethic around moral rules or principles. In a Polanyian ethic, moral rules or principles, such as utility or autonomy will be understood as useful tools, part of a complete moral toolbox, that have emerged from previous efforts at discerning the good and the right. A Polanyian ethic will therefore treat rules and principles as “rules of thumb” that cannot exhaust ethical reflection for they must themselves always be interpreted as they are applied to different situations. As we examine the details of a particular ethical problem, principles or rules will at best sensitize us to clues and point us in fruitful directions as we seek to find the “meaning,” or fitting response to a problem.

Third, in light of the reality of moral disagreement, a Polanyian ethic will resist both moral skepticism or relativism and moral absolutism, while

⁶¹ I have addressed the latter topic to some extent in my “Polanyian Reflections on Embodiment, the Human Genome Initiative, and Theological Anthropology,” *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1996-1997): 5-15 and *Faithful Innovation: The Rule of God and a Christian Practical Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys), 106-111.

⁶² For an accessible account of theses interconnections, see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin 1994).

remaining committed to moral standards. It will recognize that skepticism and relativism are ultimately self-defeating, perhaps a form of moral inversion in which dogmatic claims to moral truth are made despite the fact that skeptics and relativists have denied the reality of the grounds they stand on. Instead of treating moral pronouncements as universal, one-size-fits-all conclusions like moral absolutists, it will offer perspectives with universal intent, something provisional in light of current evidence, a perspective that we invite others to consider. We can therefore expect better understandings of moral truth to emerge as we continue to explore and engage moral issues, problems, and questions in the company of others.

Finally, a Polanyian ethic can enrich our understanding of certain virtues. For example, Polanyi's account of judgment enriches our understanding of practical wisdom by reminding us to pay attention to details and that ethical stances are best understood as integrations of clues for fitting responses to a situation, not universally absolute rights or wrongs. Polanyi's discussion of commitment adds a new resonance to fortitude or courage as it increasingly takes courage to affirm the existence of a reality, that standards such as the good, the true, the beautiful are real, even if difficult to discern, and that there are some ways of life, such as a free society, that are indeed better than others.⁶³

Reviewing the Map

Despite the fact that it has been 60+ years since Polanyi charged ethics with addressing the moral pathologies of the era, ethicists have still not developed an explicitly Polanyian ethic, myself included.⁶⁴ In this essay, I have acted as a scout to map the territories a systematic Polanyian ethic needs to explore and inhabit. In keeping with the extent of Polanyi's vision that moves from inanimate objects to various levels of life, culminating in the restless quest of humanity to understand the cosmos of which we are part, a Polanyian ethic will be expansive and capacious.

Regarding the first territory of a vision of the good life, a Polanyian ethic will acknowledge the limits of our knowledge, call us nevertheless to keep

⁶³ See also n. 24 above for discussion of fairness and toleration. While it is true that Polanyi later minimizes his emphasis on commitment, he does not reject its importance. He only says that he has "reduced" his "reliance" on it now that he has worked out the structure of tacit knowing (see *Tacit Dimension*, x). I interpret this to mean that commitment has become part of the "from" in the from-to structure of his thought.

⁶⁴ While I think that my constructive ethic (*Faithful Innovation*) is compatible with this Polanyian map, I recognize that I am not in a good position to decide that.

exploring reality, even intangibles like goodness and justice, and develop a community that balances personal freedom with public liberty. Regarding the second territory, an account of human agency will take into account human embodiment and embeddedness in this universe. It will also take into account our capacities and limitations to know, to feel, and to do without succumbing to the temptations of moral absolutism or moral skepticism.

In the end, Polanyi points us to an ethic that transcends sterile introductory treatments of deontological, teleological, and aretaic schools of ethics which tend respectively to reduce morality or ethics to the simple application of applying principles to moral quandaries, calculating consequences of actions, or inculcating virtues. As useful as that tradition may be for initiating people into the discipline, a Polanyian ethic will break out of it to develop approaches to ethics that are more comprehensive, holistic, and fruitful.

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