

Paul Nagy

## PHILOSOPHY IN A DIFFERENT VOICE: MICHAEL POLANYI ON LIBERTY AND LIBERALISM [\[1\]](#)

### ABSTRACT

Key words: liberty, liberalism, philosophy and society, Polanyi, tradition, virtue ethics

*Polanyi belongs to a tradition which is neither modernist nor postmodernist, but which affirms speculative philosophy as an alternative to both and as an important form of public discourse. With his origins in the philosophical culture of central Europe, he may well emerge as a bridge between continental and Anglo-American analytic philosophy. He was a moral philosopher in the Aristotelian tradition who anticipated the turn in recent years away from the modern ethics of rules to the classical ethics of virtue. Within this context he espoused a new kind of liberalism and a different understanding of liberty.*

While Michael Polanyi spent the better part of his career immersed in philosophical issues, he seems to have reflected very little and not to have said very much at all about the philosophical enterprise itself. This raises a number of intriguing questions. Apart from his virtuosity in constructing complex and subtle ideas and highly technical arguments, just what sort of philosopher was he? What was his understanding of philosophy and its relation to other disciplines? How can we characterize his thought overall, beyond the specific reform he proposed in epistemology, in metaphysics, and in the philosophy of the physical and social sciences?

The introduction to a collection of essays on Polanyi's thought [\[2\]](#) offers some guidance in these matters. The editors of this volume call *Personal Knowledge* an "exasperating book" and ponder the reasons why such prominent critics as May Brodbeck and Michael Oakeshott had problems with it. Brodbeck dismissed Polanyi's venture into philosophy with harsh words. Saying that "cobblers should stick to their lasts", she called the book a "tender-minded assault on the life of reason." And Oakeshott declared it to be "disordered, repetitive, digressive and often obscure." [\[3\]](#)

The editors, Langford and Poteat, propose an explanation by calling attention to Polanyi's effective use of a mix of stylistic devices and strategies including dialectic, aphorisms, and homilies. They characterize these devices as the elements of "an integral rhetoric," [\[4\]](#) and of a rhetorical style which, when used in conjunction with empirical psychology, the sociology of knowledge, and political philosophy, becomes a form of confession in the tradition of St. Augustine. They call the book "a reflexive exercise in discovering one's own beliefs." [\[5\]](#)

Langford and Poteat offer a clue here as to where we might place Polanyi in the philosophical culture of the twentieth century. They seem to suggest that we look at the rhetorical tradition in Western

philosophy, from the Greek Sophists of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Rorty in our own time, to find answers. This tradition, as Robert Neville notes, elevates "persuasiveness of argument" to the highest level of intellectual excellence, but it rejects the claim of philosophers that the purpose of the intellect is to know the truth:

According to the rhetorical tradition there is no truth that measures our assertions, only a body of arguments that shape the world of discourse within which assertions take place. Philosophy's deception, according to the rhetoricians, is its suggestion that there is a truth to which it is loyal when in fact any philosophy is only a cluster of arguments expressing the interest of the philosopher.[\[6\]](#)

This tradition is currently represented, of course, by the end-of-philosophy movement within postmodernism which sees itself as the alternative to modernist philosophy and its preoccupation with the issues of foundationalism and epistemology.

But Polanyi's profound respect for and his commitment to the truth would seem to rule him out as a postmodernist thinker and to place him somewhere entirely outside its orbit. And yet he has something of immense importance to say about epistemology and about the foundations of philosophy, especially to that group of postmodernists for whom moral truth is only a matter of ideological rhetoric, but who nevertheless find themselves sliding uncomfortably into moral decay and intellectual anarchy.[\[7\]](#) From this standpoint Polanyi belongs to a tradition which is neither modernist nor postmodernist, neither critical nor rhetorical, but a tradition so aptly described by Neville as the high road around modernism. While there may be disagreement on specific issues, the members of this tradition share the conviction, that it is possible to engage in speculative philosophy and that Nietzsche and Heidegger, deconstructionists and postmodernists, do not have the final word. The travelers Polanyi would meet on this road are, among others, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and Alfred North Whitehead.[\[8\]](#)

But this doesn't answer the puzzle of why his work has been so poorly received and in some instances even ignored by professional philosophers. Harry Prosch believes that a partial answer may be found in the way in which Polanyi embraces both the theoretical and the practical, the "intellectual" and the "active" dimensions of philosophical problems. He gave public witness to the belief that philosophers must be critics not only of the "intellectual shibboleths" but also of the "action shibboleths of our time". Academic philosophy has a tendency to be too esoteric and to take too myopic a view of what it should be doing. Prosch recalls that

one of these philosophers, G. V. Warnock, once contemptuously expressed to me [that] Polanyi was not a philosopher at all. He was only a *philosophe*. The general format within which Polanyi expressed his views was anathema to by far the greater part of English and American philosophers of his time. They were unable to take him seriously.[\[9\]](#)

By calling him a *philosophe*, Warnock and others seem to want to consign him to the rhetorical tradition

in its latest postmodernist version. But from Prosch's perspective, Polanyi was something more; he was a physician/philosopher. He diagnosed what was wrong with the human condition in both thought and action, and prescribed a course of treatment. Shifting his metaphor, Prosch in another context describes Polanyi's program of treatment as the exorcism of "the twin devils of the ideal of knowledge as detached objectivity and the ideal of action as moral perfectionism."[\[10\]](#)

It strikes me that in his career as a physician/philosopher (or *philosophe*), Polanyi presents an interesting instance of the public intellectual performing in the role of a social, cultural, and religious critic. He gives us a glimpse of what philosophy can be when it becomes an intellectual calling which is pursued in the public arena. He is an example of what Dewey had in mind when he said that "philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method ... for dealing with the problems of men."[\[11\]](#) In contrast with most professional philosophers who are highly competent but narrowly focused specialists, Polanyi may be characterized as a public intellectual and generalist as well as a competent specialist in science. And, as a public intellectual, he took seriously the possibility that his work as a scientist carried with it a greater calling to serve the common good.

A more obvious reason why academic philosophers refuse to take his work seriously might be that he lacked formal philosophical credentials. But a more important reason for their misgivings is in his influence in other disciplines despite these deficiencies in philosophy, and because of his success as a social critic and a public intellectual. The seriousness with which his work continues to be taken in the social and behavioural sciences, in the arts, in education, and in religious thought seems inversely related to its neglect by academic philosophers.

I have a two-fold aim in this paper. The first is to examine some of the features of his philosophy which would support my characterization of it in terms of social and cultural criticism, and hence my characterization of Polanyi himself as a public intellectual. In this connection, I believe that he was ardently committed to philosophy as an important form of public discourse. My second purpose is to argue that the concept of liberty is one of the essential, organizing principles in his work and crucial to an understanding of his philosophy as a whole.

The task of sorting out these threads in Polanyi's thought, of sorting out his contributions to philosophy in the twentieth century and to its future direction, and, finally, of placing him in an appropriate and meaningful context in relation to other major thinkers of our time, demands our attention. There is some evidence that this task is about to begin. In a seminal paper on "The New European Philosophy,"[\[12\]](#) Barry Smith argues that there presently exists, in addition to the traditions of analytic and continental philosophy, a distinctive philosophical culture in central and eastern Europe.

The culture of analytic philosophy is dominated by an understanding that its function is the narrowly focused examination of language problems. The clarification and purification of these problems precedes (or even replaces) the ways in which traditional philosophers conduct their examination of the large questions of philosophy. Analytic philosophers view their work as a necessary preliminary stage in

which language must first be purged of its impurities before traditional philosophers and public intellectuals may address the issues of tradition and society. Consequently, it tends to be somewhat esoteric and removed from general public discourse.

The traditions of continental philosophy, on the other hand, are more of an open enterprise and more in the public arena. Smith sees the philosophical traditions of central and eastern Europe as an alternative to these two cultures. As a third culture, they hold the potential of mediating the differences between the first two. He predicts that "the centre of gravity of European philosophy is set to move east,"[\[13\]](#) and that a consequence of this shift will be the development of new interdisciplinary alliances on the continent

between philosophy and other disciplines, including mathematical logic, linguistics, psychology ... Also the establishment of a new of extended canon of "Continental philosophy," a new list of exemplars ... (intellectual "masters") ... embracing figures beyond the usual confines of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Habermas, Gadamer, etc. to include Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Slovenes---new philosophical heroes who can be seen as part of a continuing tradition of philosophy stretching from Bolzano and Brentano to the present day ... Thinkers worthy of being mentioned in this connection are Aurel Kolnai, Michael Polanyi, Roman Jakobson, Max Scheler, Stanislaw Lesniewski, Takeusz Kotarbinski, and Josef Bochenski.[\[14\]](#)

Smith envisions the possibility that this philosophical culture of central Europe will also have a transforming influence on Anglo-American analytic philosophy.

The latter has hitherto been seen in Continental Europe as a rather narrow affair, allied of its very nature to positivistic, reductionistic and materialistic tendencies and somehow excessively oriented around formal logic and natural science at the expense of concerns with ... politics, law and culture. If ... Brentano and Twardowski, Reinach and Polanyi are included as part of a single tradition along with Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein and Carnap, then this tradition ... is no longer exclusively oriented around language or logic ... Analytic philosophy in this wider sense is distinguished not by positivism or reductionism but rather by its concern with a certain sort of clarity, the clarity of argument.[\[15\]](#)

With the prospect that these new alliances and re-alignments as envisioned by Smith will indeed occur, there arises a need to examine Polanyi as a prominent figure in the philosophical culture of central Europe because of the special way in which he presents a bridge to the continental and the analytic cultures. But more to the point that Smith makes in the above text, he brings to the continental and analytic cultures a distinct and compelling sense of the "clarity of argument" and its primacy in a free society. This, as I hope to show in the next section, is evident in the principles of fairness and tolerance which he so carefully laid out.

## I

Polanyi called for a general epistemological reform as a prescription for the ills which have afflicted

Western civilization in the twentieth century. He argued effectively that the totalitarianisms of both left and right have been excessively passionate moral responses to the nihilism inherent in modern critical philosophy, and he proposed a highly innovative theory of knowledge as the point of departure in this epistemological reform.

But how did Polanyi in fact understand philosophy as distinct from other forms of inquiry? He offers no explicit answer to this question, but we may find evidence in his theories of tacit knowing and personal knowledge. In every act of personal judgement, there is an unaccountable element which eludes the grasp of reason. We come to know something "by comprehending the coherence of [a set of] largely unspecifiable particulars."[\[16\]](#) These particulars reside in our subsidiary or tacit awareness, and by means of indwelling the particulars, we come "to know more than we can tell."

Polanyi professes that his obligation as a scientist and as a philosopher (his "personal calling" as it were) to search for and serve the truth is grounded in the unspecifiable particulars of his own subsidiary awareness.

I must admit that I can fulfil my obligation to serve the truth only to the extent of my natural abilities as developed by my education. *No one can transcend his formative milieu very far*, and beyond this area he must rely on it uncritically. I consider that *this matrix of my thought determines my personal calling*. It both offers me my opportunity for seeking the truth, and limits my responsibility for arriving at my own conclusions[\[17\]](#) [my emphasis].

William James had a similar insight when he noted that "temperament" largely determines men in their philosophies, and that we should look in this direction for the initial evidence we seek about the nature of an individual's philosophy.[\[18\]](#) James also said that to understand the latter we must first grasp the "centre of vision, by an act of the imagination ..."[\[19\]](#) Neither James nor Polanyi are engaging in psychological reductionism here, for they are not seeking to explain away philosophy but to grasp it more fully by means of these unspecifiable particulars.

What, then, is the "formative milieu" or the "matrix" of Polanyi's thought? Paul Ignatus presents us with an account rich in insight in his essay on "The Hungary of Michael Polanyi."[\[20\]](#) He argues that liberalism was the ruling idea in Hungary during the period 1867 to 1918. It was a liberalism born out of a defiance of Hapsburg absolutism. In the milieu of Polanyi's youth, one could find a commitment to "parliamentarism, religious tolerance, a general contempt for prohibitions and restrictions, the will to industrialize ... and to rely on education rather than authority."[\[21\]](#)

But, on the other hand, while it appeared to cherish these radical ideals, the Hungary of the *Ausgleich* was in fact a conservative country which gave only lip service to liberalism. Despite this contradiction, Ignatus finds it to be "a country of fascinating progress," for "it created cities and factories, model universities, leading engineers, doctors, psycho-analysts, poets and composers."[\[22\]](#)

These antinomies appear to have left a permanent mark on Polanyi's philosophical temperament. Throughout his life he was a radical in the search for truth, but he was the most moderate of radicals. He had the reputation of a man with the courage, as Ignotus puts it, to dissent from the dissenters. His commitment to the search for truth "led him to the re-discovery of basic tenets which no liberal movement or liberal profession can disregard without destroying its own foundations." Ignotus concludes:

I cannot help feeling that the intellectual environment of his youth has profoundly influenced his development. From it he inherited the limitless liberality of his mind, the simultaneity of personal and technical interests, and the ability to co-ordinate them in behaviour as well as in philosophy. What made him differ most from those around him was his reverence. He thinks that the intellectual youth of Hungary and of some other countries, when 'revising' its dogmas of revolutionary origin, is meeting him on the grounds of re-discovered ethical traditions. Whether or not this applies in every respect to the young men of our time, it does apply to Michael Polanyi himself. The inherent radicalism and the scientific sensibility of his intellect have made him up to date, and the grain of conservatism in it, his attachment to the perennial, enables him to be ahead of his time.[\[23\]](#)

Polanyi published his first philosophical treatise, *Science, Faith and Society*, in 1946. In it, he sketched out the general themes and ideas which he subsequently developed in other works. The qualities of his philosophical temperament as characterized by Ignotus, are evident in this seminal work. His examination of the question of the nature of science led him to the conclusion that

to accord validity to science---or to any other of the great domains of the mind---is to express a faith which can be upheld within a community. We realize here the connexion between *Science, Faith and Society* adumbrated in these essays.[\[24\]](#)

There exists what Polanyi called the republic of science made up of a community of inquirers who share a common belief in the existence of a reality whose hidden truths are capable of being discovered. Intrinsic to this belief is a love of the truth. But more than this, it is through professing an obligation to a particular set of scientific principles and ideals which reside in a particular tradition of science that an individual becomes a member of this republic and possesses the freedom to conduct experimental investigations. And so it is with all other modes of inquiry beyond the scientific: freedom is acquired through membership in a community, a membership which entails an obligation to a particular set of values and traditions. "Just as an individual cannot be obliged in general, so also he cannot be free in general."[\[25\]](#)

It is in the context of this argument that we find not only his concept of freedom in its inchoate form, but we also find a compelling account of the intrinsic connection between freedom and tradition in a free society. This account is significant in the way in which it reveals something fundamental to Polanyi's philosophical temperament as it was shaped by the milieu which Ignotus describes. Polanyi tells us that the premises which must guide individual conscience in a free society are to be found in the art of free

discourse. Free discourse is possible only when it exists within a tradition of civic liberties. This art and this tradition are nourished and protected by the institutions of democracy.

He identifies two fundamental principles underlying free, open discourse in a democratic society: fairness and tolerance. The former is defined as objectivity, by which he means the separation of facts from opinions and opinions from emotions in our arguments, and the presentation of all three in this descending order. Fairness reduces our position to a minimum and leaves us vulnerable to our adversary, but this is what it necessarily requires of us. The other principle, tolerance, is "the capacity to listen to an unfair and hostile statement by an opponent in order to discover his sound points as well as the reason for his errors." [26]

The principles of fairness and tolerance stand on a metaphysical principle which is the cornerstone of a free, democratic society: a belief in the existence of truth, a love of truth, an obligation to seek it, and a belief in the possibility of actually achieving it. These beliefs and this obligation are not bloodless abstractions; they are principles embodied in the concrete practice of the art of free public discourse. This art "is a communal art, practised according to a tradition which passes from generation to generation." [27]

Belief in the existence of truth is fundamental not only to Polanyi's understanding of a free society, but to his understanding of philosophy as well. As a calling to a particular way of life, philosophy is fundamentally discursive in the Socratic sense because of the discursive nature of human knowing itself.

## II.

Polanyi had no interest in ethical theory and never wrote a formal treatise on ethics. He came to the conclusion that the ethical theories developed in modern critical philosophy were responsible for the moral perfectionism which was one of the causes [28] of the excessive moral fanaticisms and moral inversions [29] of our time. Whether it be Hobbes's principle of self-preservation, Locke's social contract, Kant's categorical imperative, or Mill's greatest happiness principle, the modern quest for moral perfection which is to be achieved through a supreme and universally applicable moral principle, has proved futile. We see the results in the nihilism to which fascism and communism responded with a devastatingly violent moral passion.

Yet while he dismissed this futile quest for moral perfection, Polanyi was pre-eminently a moral philosopher. As a scientist, philosopher, and public intellectual, he realized that the moral dimension is a pervasive and inescapable fact of our human experience. In this regard, he anticipated the recent revolution in moral philosophy [30] which abandons the pursuit of an abstract ideal of moral perfection in an ethics of principle in favour of a concrete ethics of virtue and its implications for the development of moral character. The major difference between the two is that the latter demands of us a continuous moral growth without the expectation of reaching moral perfection, while the former requires only a minimal adherence to a supreme and universally applicable principle in order to achieve perfection. [31]

The ethics of virtue has its historical roots in Aristotle, in his idea that as moral agents we are obliged to pursue excellence by developing the qualities of our moral character. In doing this, we are more likely to acquire happiness, or what he calls *eudaimonia*, as a by-product. *Eudaimonia* is not the happiness which we normally associate with the gratification of desire. Rather, it is the condition of living in harmony with oneself, with one's *daimon* or ideal personhood.[\[32\]](#)

Polanyi's moral philosophy stands within this Aristotelian tradition of eudaimonistic ethics. In rejecting the perfectionism of modern critical theory, he reminds us that *moral excellence* in the Aristotelian sense and *moral perfection* in the modern sense are not at all the same thing. Moral perfection is a commitment to reaching an ideal specifically expressed in a particular principle such as the greatest happiness principle or the categorical imperative.

Moral excellence, on the other hand, involves a commitment to a developmental way of life which embraces several dimensions of growth, not only the ethical. In the eudaimonism of Aristotle, one's ideal self (one's moral character) is a complex and richly woven tapestry. It entails pursuits found in several facets of life, in the arts and in science, in religion, philosophy, politics, etc. A commitment to moral perfection is a commitment to a chimera, but a commitment to moral excellence is a commitment to a concrete goal or set of goals made possible by our empathy or dwelling in the unspecifiable particulars of our subsidiary awareness (i.e. our *daimon*, the sum of our better potentialities) for the purpose of focusing on a specifiably reachable goal.

This implicit eudaimonism in Polanyi's moral philosophy helps us better to understand the central importance of liberty and its primacy in human life. Polanyi shared with Aristotle the belief that ethics and politics are inseparable, that the former is a branch of the latter, and that both are involved in the promotion of *eudaimonia*. The purpose of ethics is to guide the individual in the direction of the good life while the purpose of politics is to move the polis toward the good society. In other words, ethics is the study of how to live well as a polis or, as John Dewey would put it, how to create the great community. Just as Aristotle's ethics are social and his politics ethical, so it is for Polanyi. But unlike Aristotle, Polanyi sees quite clearly that the linchpin between the two is liberty. The good life is within the reach of the individual only if he or she is free to aspire to it, and this aspiration is possible only within a society which has a tradition of civic liberty.

There are two mistaken ways of understanding freedom, and both are distractions from its true meaning. One is an understanding of freedom as the absence of external restraint; Polanyi calls this an "individualistic, self-assertive conception". The other, its opposite, is a conception of freedom as the "liberation from personal ends by submission to impersonal obligations."[\[33\]](#) Both conceptions lack a moral content. Freedom does not reside in the atomic individual who has a license to do as he pleases with an indifference to any standard which would impose boundaries on his behaviour. One can be free only if one is faithful to the moral truths inscribed in one's heart. And these truths are inscribed by the traditional commitments of a free society to such spiritual ideals as truth, justice and beauty.

The essence of liberty does not lie in a discrete, unencumbered individual who is free to do as he pleases

so long as he refrains from limiting or encroaching on the freedom of others. This would result in a moral minimalism which would bring us to the brink of moral anarchy, chaos, and eventually to nihilism. Such an understanding of freedom rests upon a sharp distinction between private and public morality, and it diminishes the prospect of a genuine human community. "Private individualism," Polanyi writes, "is no important pillar of public liberty. A free society is not an Open Society, but one fully dedicated to a distinctive set of beliefs."[\[34\]](#) A genuinely free society cannot be "open" on matters of truth and falsehood. It cannot be neutral with respect to justice and injustice, to honesty and fraud, to compassion and cruelty, to knowledge and ignorance, or to self-discipline and slovenliness. These are not matters for the private individual to decide in the solitude of his own heart, independently of the commonly held beliefs of society.

There must be boundaries for freedom to exist, and these boundaries must be defined by political authority and moral consensus. But just as political authority cannot be equated with a formal set of laws or a legal system, so also the essential meaning of freedom cannot be confined to a formal definition. "Only within a free society can free institutions preserve freedom." A tradition of freedom is the *sine qua non* of actual freedom.

When this tradition is assimilated into the interior landscape of individual citizens, it renders them free. It "dwells within the peoples of free countries." It doesn't exist

in the explicit content of ... constitutional rules, but in the *tacit practice* of interpreting these rules. It is on the *unspecifiable art* of conducting free activities that the preservation of freedom must rely ... All formulations of liberal principles must derive their meaning from a prior knowledge, *diffused inarticulately* among the citizens of free countries.[\[35\]](#) [my emphasis]

The survival of free institutions cannot be guaranteed by the existence of a code of law alone. It can only be assured by the continuous practice of interpreting this code and by the art of living a free life in light of this interpretation. And much of this lies within the tacit dimension of our lives.

Traditional practices[\[36\]](#) by which freedom is defined and limited, far from being an adversary and a threat to liberty, are a vital source of its renewal and growth. They make possible the process of continuous social and moral improvement in a free society. These practices stand in opposition to the idea that we are capable of reaching moral perfection. There is an "ever-not-quite," as William James would have said, to all our moral struggles, and this allows us to abandon such an absurd quest.[\[37\]](#) Our moral allegiance must be to what Polanyi calls "a manifestly imperfect, if not *immoral* society; and we ... find, paradoxically, that our duty lies in the service of ideals which we nevertheless know we cannot possibly achieve."[\[38\]](#)

So we have an obligation, in a free society, to learn what the limits of our freedom are. For in learning these limits, we become capable of transcending them and of moving "in the direction of continually richer and fuller meanings" and thus expanding "limitlessly the firmament of values under which we dwell."[\[39\]](#)

In the final analysis, it was one of Polanyi's rich insights that the limitations of an imperfect world make possible the limitless expansion of the horizons of human life. We find the genius of his philosophy not only in his reformulation of the problems of modern epistemology by reinstating the fiduciary character in human knowledge to its rightful place. His genius and originality as a thinker reveals itself in the way in which he connected the complexities and subtleties of personal knowledge with a wide range of the moral, social and political problems which we in the twentieth century have faced.

---

## Notes

1. This essay was originally prepared as part of a project supported by the Central European University and directed by the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association in Budapest. It first appeared in *Tradition & Discovery*, Vol. XXII. No. 3. TAD appreciates the cooperation of MPLA and *Polanyiana*.
2. *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, eds. Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968)
3. Langford and Poteat, p. 4-5.
4. Langford and Poteat, p. 13.
5. Langford and Poteat, p. 14. In support of this claim, Langford and Poteat cite a text from *Personal Knowledge*. "The principal purpose of this book 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."
6. *The Highroad Around Modernism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 17.
7. See for example John Rothfork, 'Postmodern Ethics: Richard Rorty and Michael Polanyi', *Southern Humanities Review*, Vol. 29. [1995] pp. 15-48.
8. I explore Polanyi's affinities with pragmatism in 'Some Traces of Pragmatism and Humanism in Michael Polanyi's Personal Knowledge', *Hungarian Studies*, Vol. 9. No. 1-2 (Budapest 1993), pp. 139-150.
9. Harry Prosch, *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1986], p. 274.
10. Prosch, p. 272.
11. *John Dewey on Experience, Nature, and Freedom*, ed. Richard Berstein [New York: Liberal Arts

Press, 1960], pp. 66-67.

**12.** Barry Smith ed. *Philosophy and Political Change in Eastern Europe* [LaSalle, III.: The Hegeler Institute & Monist Library of Philosophy, 1993].

**13.** Smith, p. 167.

**14.** Smith, p. 168.

**15.** Smith, p. 169.

**16.** Michael Polanyi, 'Knowing and Being', *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed.: Marjorie Grene [Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969] p. 135.

**17.** 'Knowing and Being', p. 133.

**18.** William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridan Books, 1955), p. 35

**19.** The Letters of William James, ed. Henry James, 2 vols. (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920) Vol. 2., p. 355.

**20.** Paul Ignotus, 'The Hungary of Michael Polanyi.' *The Logic of Personal Knowledge* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961]

**21.** Ignotus, p. 4.

**22.** Ignotus, p. 5.

**23.** Ignotus, p. 12.

**24.** *Science, Faith and Society* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964], p. 73.

**25.** SFS, p. 65.

**26.** SFS, p. 68.

**27.** SFS, p. 71.

**28.** *Meaning* [Chicago, 1975] p. 213.

**29.** Polanyi defines moral inversion as the channelling of moral passions into acts of violence, brutality,

and cruelty in the name of sublime moral ideals.

**30.** I am referring to such watershed works as Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* [1978] and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* [1984]

**31.** David Norton gives us a clear explanation of this distinction in *Democracy and Moral Development* [Berkeley University of California Press, 1991]. Rules ethics is minimalist in that it regards "many of the choice-making situations of ordinary life as nonmoral." It is also minimalist "by virtue of its understanding of rules as applicable uniformly to everyone under the requirements of 'universalizability' and 'impartiality.' If what is right for anyone must be right for everyone in relevantly similar circumstances, then what is right must be such as can be recognized and acted upon by persons who possess very little in the way of developed moral character" [p. xi].

**32.** Norton, p. 3.

**33.** *Meaning*, p. 201.

**34.** *The Logic of Liberty* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951], p. vi. The reference here is to Karl Popper's "Open Society." It is commonly assumed that in a free society there can be no attempt to control thought, but that all ideas must compete in the open marketplace. "The free society was therefore sometimes described as the `open' society---notably by Sir Karl Popper---as against the `closed' one . However ... our free societies were by no means so open . Many traditions put severe restrictions upon men's freedoms" (*Meaning*, p. 183). Polanyi summarizes his view thus: "... a free society *rests upon a traditional framework* of a certain sort" (*Meaning*, p. 184). It would therefore be a serious mistake to equate a Popperian "open society" and Polanyi's notion of a "free society": "A wholly open society would be a wholly vacuous one---one which could never actually exist, since it could never have any reason for existing" (*Meaning*, p. 184).

**35.** `On Liberalism and Liberty', *Encounter*, 4 [March 1955], p. 31.

**36.** Polanyi anticipates Alasdair MacIntyre in his understanding of practice. MacIntyre describes three stages in the development of virtue: a practice, the narrative order of a single human life, and a moral tradition. He defines a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to ... that form of activity." *After Virtue* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], p. 187.

**37.** *The Thought and Character of William James*. ed. Ralph Barton Perry (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1936) Vol. 2., p. 700.

**38.** *Meaning*, p. 214.

39. *Meaning*, p. 216.

---

**Polanyiana** Volume 5, Number 1, 1996, pp. 101-112

<http://www.kfki.hu/chemonet/polanyi/>

<http://www.ch.bme.hu/chemonet/polanyi/>

---

[Back to Contents](#)