

## **“Balance of Mind’: Polanyi’s Response to the Second Apple and the Modern Predicament**

The ideal of an impersonally detached truth would have to be reinterpreted, to allow for the inherently personal character of the act by which truth is declared. The hope of achieving an acceptable balance of mind in this respect will guide the subsequent inquiry throughout...this book (*Personal Knowledge*, 71).<sup>1</sup>

In *Personal Knowledge*, within the chapter titled “Conviviality,” Michael Polanyi describes our “civic predicament” (203-204; cf. 214). In what follows I will argue that the civic predicament is a manifestation on the political and social level of a deeper and more fundamental disorder on the level of the person. I will further argue that this personal disorder, along with the associated distress, is at the center of *Personal Knowledge*, and that Polanyi’s primary objective in writing the book is to elucidate this condition and to offer a response to it. As we will see, the nature of the personal disorder, and hence the civic crisis, is richly captured in Polanyi’s metaphor of the “second apple.” His recommended response to this condition, which I will maintain is at the heart of his thought and constitutes his primary contribution to contemporary intellectual life, is a perspective that he explicates under the heading, “balance of mind.” There are, moreover, striking parallels between “balance of mind” and the Christian life as Polanyi conceives it. Without a clear understanding of the modern predicament growing out of the second apple, and Polanyi’s novel and ingenious response to it, we will have neither grasped the core of his thought nor recognized the sense in which he is, or is not, responsibly regarded as Christian.

### **The Problem as Understood by Polanyi**

Polanyi’s “civic predicament” is the name of a process that leads to totalitarian arrangements as well as to that result itself. For immediate purposes what is most important are the conditions that give rise to the process. On this matter Polanyi is both clear and somber. After pointing out that “our adherence to the truth can be seen to imply our adherence to a society which respects the truth, and which we trust to respect it,” he observes that “[o]nce we fully recognize these civic coefficients of our intellectual passions, we shall be confronted once

again, and even more dangerously with the realization that we hold with universal intent a set of convictions acquired by our particular upbringing” (*PK*, 203). What is the danger here and why does it exist? The answer is that due to powerful developments in intellectual life (beginning, on Polanyi’s account, with “the Copernican discovery”) we are strongly tempted, indeed, in many cases compelled,<sup>2</sup> to infer from the admission that convictions (standards) are local and contingent that they lack genuine authority. They are “merely” particular. Under the influence of this judgment, “to the extent to which we acknowledge that we have actively decided to accept [those convictions and standards], they will tend to appear arbitrary” (203). Therefore, only a dupe would give way to them (211). To accept the authority of convictions that we acknowledge are contingent and local would indicate that we have foolishly regarded standards that are merely “adventitious” (204) to be universal. No responsible individual can consent to such bad faith! Given, then, for Polanyi, the intimate connection between commitment to principles and the existence of viable civic life, the consequence is predictable: “Thus the disturbance of our convictions caused by the sight of our own ubiquitous participation in the shaping of truth, will expand into a civic predicament, and the struggle to regain our mental balance in this situation will gain a new significance” (204). The civic predicament is, then, rooted in a frame of mind. Polanyi’s remedy will necessarily consist of a radical reorientation of that frame of mind.<sup>3</sup>

The centrality of this analysis to Polanyi’s thought is further indicated by the fact that a similar account is at the heart of a later writing (from 1965). Tellingly, this contribution is titled “On the Modern Mind.”<sup>4</sup> Among the primary characteristics of this mind is a skepticism that, ironically, is in the service of “a moral purpose, namely of a relentless intellectual honesty” (12). As in *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi here points out that the modern mind is therefore marked by internal conflict: in the name of principle it calls all principles into question. For now, we must put this fascinating and ominous matter aside and ask, instead, about the origins of the powerful impulse toward skepticism.<sup>5</sup> In this endeavor, the second apple illuminates the landscape.

Polanyi’s metaphor of the second apple exists within a tale that highlights a persistent appetite that cannot be satisfied. In this tale, there must, of course, be a first apple. That term refers to the Biblical account in which Adam and Eve, under the influence of the Serpent, bite of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The temptation responsible for this act may well play a prominent role in Polanyi’s tale. Of greater importance to Polanyi, however, is the insight

gained from the first apple. Something hitherto absent, knowledge of good and evil (or at least a concern with it), is now an enduring and indelible feature of human life. Paradise is lost and mankind will forever be fundamentally different than it once was. For Polanyi the most important aspect of this transformation is the loss of innocence. Where once there was a seamless simplicity, there now is a chronic complexity, i.e., man is troubled in an unprecedented way.

In Polanyi's sweeping account of Western intellectual and cultural history, the authority of the Biblical account grows increasingly doubtful (especially in the wake of the Copernican discovery) and we eventually find ourselves in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in which the most influential and creative minds proudly and confidently declare their independence from the alleged theocratic fantasies of the species' youth. Such confidence is largely a product of man's growing appreciation of the results of his own investigations of the world. On this perspective, it is patent that the universe can in fact be understood, and man, exclusively through his own devices, is capable of unlocking its secrets (that is, grasping the fundamental principles), and thereby making sense of it all. These are heady times. Significantly, these sophisticated minds are still marked by a yearning comparable to that of the earlier religious believers. No less than their predecessors, they seek order and meaning. Or, more fundamentally, the later thinkers represent a continuation of the desire to discern some sense in the universe and to grasp the significance of man's place within it. But now, without precedent, the old appetite coexists with "the greatly increased critical powers of man" which have "endowed our mind with a capacity for self-transcendence of which we can never again divest ourselves" (268). Polanyi then completes the picture:

We have plucked from the Tree a second apple which has for ever imperiled our knowledge of Good and Evil, and we must learn to know these qualities henceforth in the blinding light of our new analytical powers. Humanity has been deprived a second time of its innocence, and driven out of another garden which was at any rate a Fool's Paradise. Innocently, we had trusted that we could be relieved of all personal responsibility for our beliefs by objective criteria of validity and our own critical powers have shattered that hope. Struck by our sudden nakedness, we may try to brazen it out by flaunting it in a profession of

nihilism. But modern man's immorality is unstable. Presently his moral passions reassert themselves in objectivist disguise and the scientific Minotaur is born.

(268)

Let us pause at this point to draw out the significance of several features of this long passage from *Personal Knowledge*. To begin with, we have in Polanyi's account an instance of the "ratchet effect." Man over the centuries has experienced important transformations. These cannot be undone.<sup>6</sup> Whatever response we might devise for contemporary challenges and difficulties will need to be formulated in conjunction with a critical sophistication and potential for transcendence that cannot be reversed.<sup>7</sup> By "transcendence" Polanyi means a proclivity for critical distancing from any candidate idea or formulation, and a propensity to identify and subject to critical scrutiny its underlying presuppositions. In short, the acidic impulse toward skepticism is indefatigable and ineradicable. If the perspective afforded by the second apple has disappeared, that which is responsible for this disappearance has not.

A second central feature of Polanyi's metaphor is that the loss of the second apple, and the related forced departure from the new paradise, consists of just the sort of realization that characterizes the operation of such transcendence. Specifically, the expulsion was a direct result of seeing that there are no "objective criteria" in light of which to ground an ethics or make sense of the world. In many of his writings Polanyi enlarges upon the cultural and political responses to this disturbing realization. Such an unfolding is, in fact, at the core of his "civic predicament." It is important for our immediate purposes to emphasize that these dramatic reactions to the loss of objective criteria presuppose the legitimacy of the conviction that such foundations are intellectually and morally necessary.<sup>8</sup> We witness here in intellectual guise the persistent appetite mentioned above.

It is now evident why Polanyi states that the second apple has "imperiled our knowledge of Good and Evil." In the same way that the earlier supernatural order, formalized in scripture and Church doctrine and manifestly a product of an authority that spoke from a domain apart from and beyond that of men, deteriorated in the face of man's critical powers, so too via the second apple did its successor, predicated on "the authority of experience and reason," collapse (265). The pride of jettisoning the theocentric perspective and deriving our ethics instead from the world known by the senses and explicated by human reasoning gave way to despair and

desperation born of the same critical tendencies that destroyed the earlier order. The loss of any external authority from which we can take our cues constitutes a new nakedness. Polanyi's genius consists in recognizing this condition and in formulating a revolutionary response to it.

### **Polanyi's Response to the Predicament**

There is a ray of sunlight in the rather dark picture thus far painted by Polanyi. This consists in the realization that the very critical powers that are responsible for the demise of both "medieval dogmatism and modern positivism" (265) are also capable of acknowledging their own limitations and recognizing a need for restoration of an earlier acritical capacity as a vital component of an invigorating third alternative. Polanyi's grand human narrative consists of three epochs:

- 1) A period marked by holding unproven beliefs, not realizing (or caring) that they are unproven (a condition we might call blind faith);
- 2) An era of proud and confident critical reason, intolerant of faith, and holding beliefs, presuming they are proven (when they are in fact not); and
- 3) A just dawning fiduciary period, arising in response to the bankruptcy of its deluded predecessor, characterized by the *conscious and deliberate* holding of beliefs that we acknowledge are unproven (and unprovable).

Polanyi's primary contribution is to mark the decisive defeat of the first two of these perspectives while outlining and, in a remarkably consistent fashion, arguing for the third. In this way, Polanyi, quite self-consciously, ushers in a new era.

What are the features of the new manner of thinking? In answering this question let us begin by hearing from Polanyi as he closes "The Logic of Affirmation" (*PK*, Chapter 12) with the paragraph that follows the long passage cited above:

The alternative to this, which I am seeking to establish here, is to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs. We should be able to profess now knowingly and openly those beliefs which could be tacitly taken for granted in the days before modern philosophic criticism reached its present incisiveness. (268)

Polanyi is able to refer to his proposal as a restoration because it is built on an observation made long ago by St. Augustine: "Unless ye believe, ye shall not understand"<sup>9</sup> Polanyi states that by

returning to St. Augustine we “restore the balance of our cognitive powers” (266).

Understanding and the path to truth, as with St. Augustine, will henceforth follow from a proper appreciation of the role of belief instead of, as in the critical age, with an attempt to bypass or eliminate it. Belief, it would seem, is at the heart of a new balance of mind.

The master project of *Personal Knowledge* is well understood as a process of enablement. The book succeeds to the degree that readers (and, importantly, Polanyi himself) have strengthened their capacity to see the world and understand the truth in a certain manner.<sup>10</sup> There are several shorthand labels, as well as a rich set of cognate terms, for this condition. We will begin with the content of the labels.

The most fruitful of the labels, already suggested in the above reference to St. Augustine, is “balance of mind.” The actual term is used at least twice in *Personal Knowledge*. The first of these, on p. 71, is cited in the epigraph to this essay. Among the noteworthy aspects of this passage are its references to re-interpretation and to truth. As we will see, both matters are at the heart of the perspective that is Polanyi’s remedy for the civic predicament. The second appearance of the term, quite significantly, occurs at the close of the section titled “The Educated Mind.” In describing the product of ideal education Polanyi states, “The paradox of self-set standards is re-cast here into that of our subjective self-confidence in claiming to recognize an objective reality. This brings nearer by a great step the final conception of truth within which I shall seek to establish my balance of mind” (104).<sup>11</sup> Of note again is the connection of the new perspective with a revised conception of truth. We might even say that the two are effectively equivalent. Equally significant in this passage is the suggestion that balance of mind is the product of intellectual agility, i.e., of an act of liberation that is not compelled but is instead the result of entertaining a new possibility and permitting it to emerge.

Polanyi also refers to “mental balance.” Take, for example, the passage from p. 204 cited above. In speaking of “the struggle to regain our mental balance,” the context clearly indicates that the phrase refers to correction of a frame of mind, associated with the civic predicament, which ensued from a philosophical error. Through correction we are to retrieve something that was lost. Given what we read elsewhere in *Personal Knowledge*, it is clear that Polanyi here is referring to the perspective of St. Augustine—a perspective shaped by the recognition of the central role played by belief. In this healthier frame of mind, man’s critical powers exist in balance (creative harmony) with faith.

“Frame of mind” is in fact another of the terms employed by Polanyi. Near the center of *Personal Knowledge* he says, “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” (214). Earlier on the same page Polanyi indicates that the unbalanced condition that he hopes to remedy is rooted in a passionate infatuation with the prospect of knowledge that is entirely independent of any trace of the personal.<sup>12</sup> Polanyi’s philosophical endeavors can be understood as a compassionate effort to release his fellow man from this intoxicating, yet toxic infatuation.

The epistemological balance envisioned by Polanyi has a political and social manifestation within which the totalitarianism that issues from the civic predicament is inhibited. Where balance of mind obtains, a sense of moderation—born of appreciation for the rare and fragile conditions upon which political liberty and vibrant intellectual life are predicated—prevails. Within this atmosphere of moderation, the fanciful yet maniacal thrust for total independence of mind, and the associated desire for perfection of social and political circumstances (unalloyed justice, thoroughgoing equality of condition, etc.), are tempered. It is among Polanyi’s chief contributions to the fruition of cultural and political life, as well as to the conditions of freedom that make it possible, to demonstrate that they are utterly dependent upon maturely restricted expectation. He observes, “An absolute moral renewal of society can be attempted only by an absolute power which must inevitably destroy the moral life of man” (245). Balance of mind, then, is accompanied by refinement of judgment in realms beyond epistemology itself. In Polanyi’s measured yet inspiring words, “The attempt made in this book to stabilize knowledge against scepticism, by including its hazardous character in the conditions of knowledge, may find its equivalent, then, in an allegiance to a manifestly imperfect society, based on the acknowledgement that our duty lies in the service of ideals which we cannot possibly achieve” (245).<sup>13</sup>

The limited objectives of this inquiry forbid significant development of the matter, but we would be remiss not to mention in this connection that Polanyi’s concept of balance of mind allows him to respond with hope and guarded optimism to a critical problem that deeply worries Leo Strauss. Strauss, perhaps the most penetrating political philosopher of our time (and certainly among the most challenging and controversial), observes, “The crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose...We do no longer have that

certainty and that clarity. Some among us even despair of the future, and this despair explains many forms of contemporary Western degradation...[A] society which was accustomed to understand itself in terms of a universal purpose, cannot lose faith in that purpose without becoming completely bewildered.”<sup>14</sup> Readers familiar with Strauss are therefore stopped dead in their tracks when, in *Personal Knowledge*, they encounter the following: “Can the beliefs of liberalism, no longer believed to be self-evident, be upheld henceforth in the form of an orthodoxy?” (244).<sup>15</sup> Polanyi affirms it can. As we unfold the constituent features of balance of mind, we will see how Polanyi is able to respond in a manner so much more hopeful than does Strauss. For the time being, it is profitable to reflect on a clue offered by an additional query that follows Polanyi’s question: “Can we face the fact that, no matter how liberal a free society may be, it is also profoundly conservative?” (244).

The modesty at the center of Polanyi’s balance of mind is manifest in his imaginary exchange with the skeptic (*PK*, 315). Polanyi will not argue with the skeptic. Why? The answer is that to participate in such an argument is to concede to the very presuppositions that Polanyi in his book, especially in the concept “balance of mind,” is so mightily struggling to leave behind. To argue with the skeptic is comparable to the snake consenting to reenter its shed skin. Vigilance joins modesty, faith, and responsibility at the core of balance of mind. It also suggests that arriving at balance of mind is akin to conversion, and is not to be achieved via the frontal assault of formal argument.

As noted several times above, possession of balance of mind is fully compatible with the search for truth. Indeed, on Polanyi’s analysis, that balance is an indispensable prerequisite to the success of that search. Polanyi commences Chapter 10 of *Personal Knowledge* with perhaps the most dramatic of the confessional statements that permeate the book: “*I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.*” This sentence, summarizing my fiduciary programme, conveys an ultimate belief which I find myself holding. Its assertion must therefore prove consistent with its content by practising what it authorizes” (299; the emphasis is Polanyi’s). In what follows this testament Polanyi articulates, perhaps as well as it can be said, the fundamental paradox that defines balance of mind. He states, “This is indeed true. For in uttering this sentence I both say that I must commit myself by thought and speech, and do so at the same time. Any inquiry into our ultimate beliefs can be consistent only if it presupposes its own conclusions. It must be intentionally circular” (299).<sup>16</sup>

Note in Polanyi's words the juxtaposition of modesty and ambition, of restraint and deep enthusiasm. The capacity to grasp and appreciate "the fundamental paradox" defines the very core of the balance sought and recommended by Polanyi. It is a frame of mind whose existence requires a constant renewal of commitment. And, notably, it is nurtured by sustained faith. Making the paradox possible as well as necessary is the marked absence in this account of reference to anything impersonally objective, and of any desire for it. To have achieved balance of mind is a cleansing.

By now the reader has grown impatient awaiting greater clarification regarding the concrete features of Polanyi's balance of mind. These will emerge as we review several of the cognate terms for it used by Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*. Several of these terms were mentioned or implied in the confessional statement just cited: belief, calling, consistency, and circularity. Several others, such as self-reliance, responsibility, and commitment, will arise as we move forward.

In executing this plan it is profitable to begin with a long passage from the closing summary of Part III of *Personal Knowledge*. Here we find Polanyi returning to the question at the root of the civic predicament: "How can we claim to arrive at a responsible judgment with universal intent if the conceptual framework in which we operate is borrowed from a local culture and our motives are mixed up with the forces holding on to [existing] social privilege?" (322). Polanyi's reply was previewed earlier in the book:

It is the act of commitment in its full structure that saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective. Intellectual commitment is a responsible decision, in submission to the compelling claims of what in good conscience I conceive to be true. It is an act of hope, striving to fulfil an obligation within a personal situation for which I am not responsible and which therefore determines my calling. This hope and this obligation are expressed in the universal intent of personal knowledge. (65)

We find here many critical concepts. What do they mean? Now, at the end of Part III, Polanyi is prepared to elaborate.

A useful place to begin is with the concept of "calling." Each of us is born into a particular set of circumstances (how else could it be?) and, despite whatever education we receive and whatever broadening of experience we undergo, we are indelibly marked by our

origins and early upbringing. To infer from this fact that it is impossible to perceive truths whose range and authority exceed the boundaries of our particular background would represent a concession of the impossibility and illegitimacy of an aspiration that has characterized man since time immemorial. This for Polanyi would be a scandalous outcome. Yet Polanyi is a fair and well educated man. He is fully aware of the arguments of what has come to be known as post-modernism, and is remarkably sensitive to its predecessors in various guises such as Marxism, historicism, psychoanalysis, Nietzschean will to power, arrant skepticism, and outright nihilism. His response to these more or less responsible responses to the fact of our particularity reflects his unique genius. Rather than deny our particularity, he embraces it and repeatedly notes that he, like the rest of us, just happens to have emerged when and where he did and to believe what he does (while admitting that his own background is unusually rich). But, in opposition to the modern critical mind, he will not be defeated by this fact: “Believing as I do in the justification of deliberate intellectual commitments, I accept these accidents of personal existence as the concrete opportunities for exercising our personal responsibility. *This acceptance is the sense of my calling*” (322; the emphasis is Polanyi’s). Our particular circumstances are not a limitation; they are instead an opportunity. But they are so only if we believe this is the case, and act in that light. The action envisioned and, importantly, practiced by Polanyi himself (not the least in the very authoring of *Personal Knowledge*), begins by taking personal responsibility for one’s movement toward the truth and, as the first step in taking such responsibility, committing oneself to that endeavor and establishing and maintaining faith in the effort’s positive outcome. As for those particular circumstances (including one’s body) out of which one necessarily emerges, Polanyi counsels that we embrace the fact and regard it as a gift, for these circumstances provide the opportunity to attain and enjoy whatever goods the universe has in store for man. The term “in store” is sure to rankle the critical mind and cause it to unleash the batteries of its skepticism. But Polanyi is too agile to be susceptible to such an assault. This is because his sense of there being an unfolding purpose and our finding ourselves part of it is not grounded in an ontological claim that could, quite properly, be put on the defensive. Instead, Polanyi invites us to join St. Augustine in looking back and seeing in the world an unfolding, a playing out of a purpose greater than us. Showing a strong resemblance to aspects of the philosophy of C. S. Peirce, Polanyi urges that we not argue with the skeptic on this matter but instead act on the possibility of there being purpose and attend to the consequences of doing so.

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

A prominent feature of the balanced mind is self-reliance. “We cast off the limitations of objectivism in order to fulfil our calling, which bids us to make up our minds about the whole range of matters with which man is properly concerned” (324). More starkly, Polanyi states, “we must accredit our own judgment as the paramount arbiter of all our intellectual performances...[this is the] ultimate self-reliance, to which this entire book shall bear witness” (265). It is worth remarking that within the crucible of his modesty Polanyi’s aspirations are bold. He is second to none in wishing to know, but the mark of arriving at the truth has changed. Earlier, he asserts, “*truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it*” (305, the emphasis is Polanyi’s). The views of our fellow inquirers, present and future, of course play an indispensable role in whether we can believe, and hence in what we believe. It is because securing the assent of relevant authorities is an essential part of coming to believe the object of our commitment that Polanyi employs the dramatic formulation, “Our vision must conquer or die” (150). The searcher is self-reliant but never alone.

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

Those who are satisfied by hoping that their intellectual commitments fulfil their calling, will not find their hopes discouraged when realizing on reflection that they are only hopes. I have said that my belief in commitment is a commitment of the very kind that it authorizes; therefore, if its justification be questioned, it finds confirmation in itself. Moreover, any such confirmation will likewise prove stable towards renewed critical reflection, and so on, indefinitely. Thus, by

contrast to a statement of fact claiming to be impersonal, an affirmation made in terms of a commitment gives rise to no insatiable sequence of subsequent justifications. Instead of indefinitely shifting an ever open problem within the regress of the objectivist criticism of objectivist claims, our reflections now move from an original state of intellectual hopes to a succession of equally hopeful positions; so that by rising above this movement and reflecting on it as a whole we find the continuance of this regress unnecessary. (324)

Polanyi goes on to remark, “Commitment offers to those who accept it legitimate grounds for the affirmation of personal convictions with universal intent” (324). The balanced mind, then, enjoys grounds but has dispensed with foundations. Indeed, its distinctiveness is ultimately rooted in its thoroughgoing liberation from the idea that we require such foundations. In the place of what Polanyi characterizes as the futile and fruitless interminable quest for objectively compelling foundations he offers a perspective that acknowledges the inescapable personal nature of our knowing and our participation in the world. Justification still exists, of course, and it remains legitimate and incumbent to seek it. But we are now released from the insistent yet intrinsically disappointing demand for satisfaction of strictly external objective criteria. Instead, Polanyi invites us to be committed to commitment and to place our hopes in hope itself. Consequences will ensue from doing so and these can and will be assessed. But the assessment will be in terms of what we and, vital to Polanyi’s schema, what our fellow explorers, believe and are committed to. In this fashion “we thus resume our full intellectual powers” (324). That is, our coming to know the truth, as suggested by St. Augustine, occurs within a context of faith manifest in commitment. Our claims about the world may prove true or false. Whatever their fate, however, the resolution is the product of standards whose authority is rooted in our commitment to them. The primary challenge, then, is to “conquer my self-doubt” (267). Finally, as Polanyi repeatedly emphasizes throughout *Personal Knowledge*, this very account of the balanced mind, and his recommendation of it, are themselves subject to the very same standards—necessarily so, if we are to honor this account with our consistency. Polanyi’s peculiar assertion thus makes the most perfect sense: “To the question, ‘Who convinces whom here?’ it answers simply, ‘I am trying to convince myself.’” (265).<sup>17</sup> This is the mind capable of contending effectively with the modern predicament, and of transcending it. In light of the resulting possibilities, we might say that the second apple was a gift.<sup>18</sup>

### Christian Parallels

Throughout *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi speaks of Christian life with passion and deep respect. What does he mean by Christianity? How does he understand what takes place within it? We receive our first clue, under the heading “Dwelling In and Breaking Out,” in a discussion in Chapter 6 of the act of worship. Polanyi states, “The indwelling of the Christian worshiper is therefore a continued attempt at breaking out, at casting off the condition of man, even while humbly acknowledging its inescapability” (198). Earlier in this discussion Polanyi emphasizes the role played in worship by surrender. Also central to his account is the fact that “the worshiper accepts the obligation to achieve what he knows to be beyond his own unaided powers and strives towards it in the hope of a merciful visitation from above” (198). And, of the highest significance, Polanyi adds, “The ritual of worship is expressly designed to induce and sustain this state of anguish, surrender and hope. *The moment a man were to claim that he had arrived and would now happily contemplate his own perfection, he would be thrown back into spiritual emptiness*” (198; emphasis added). This final point is stated even more dramatically in Chapter 9:

In the chapter on Intellectual Passions [Chapter 6] I have described the Christian faith as a passionate heuristic impulse which has no prospect of consummation...[T]he sense of inadequacy inherent in the Christian faith...is part of the Christian faith that its striving can never reach an endpoint at which, having gained its desired result, its continuation would become unnecessary. A Christian who reached his spiritual endpoint in this life would have ceased to be a Christian. (280; cf. 199 and 285)

We are now in a position to recognize the striking parallels between the perspective of Christianity, as understood by Polanyi, and that of the balanced mind, a connection explicitly and dramatically asserted by him in the closing paragraph of Book Three of *Personal Knowledge* (see 324).

Let us begin by noting that Polanyi asserts that a “fiduciary philosophy,” which constitutes the core of the balanced mind, “does not eliminate doubt, but like Christianity says

that we should hold on to what we truly believe, even when realizing the absurdly remote chances of the enterprise, trusting the unfathomable intimations that call upon to do so” (318). A number of now-familiar terms are prominent here—trust, belief, and calling—in conjunction with an atmosphere of commitment. For Polanyi, Christianity illustrates the sustained faith in possibilities that defines the balanced mind. Christianity is particularly instructive in demonstrating that facts are secondary and that the plausibility of what is believed is not at all decisive.<sup>19</sup> In both cases the driving force is faith. Polanyi is very impressed by the absurdity of what Christianity asks us to believe. That absurdity raises the tension required for belief and thereby calls forth a greater degree of trust and commitment. Polanyi draws a parallel to the “apparent absurdities” of contemporary physics in which physicists “enjoy...what they alone can comprehend” (282): “Far from raising doubts in my mind concerning the rationality of Christian beliefs, the paradoxes of Christianity will serve me as examples for an analogous framing and stabilizing of other beliefs by which man strives to satisfy his own self-set standards” (282). The resulting condition of mind (and soul) is the very model for the balanced mind.

Let us pause for a moment to dwell on the question of facts. Although Polanyi is a distinguished scientist, immediate facts are not for him the central point. They cannot be, for we are to attend to the consequences of discovery more than to the discovery itself.<sup>20</sup> Still, facts are *in a sense* relevant. The history of Christianity demonstrates that the successful effort to disprove historical claims associated with Christian doctrine is capable of undermining the capacity to believe the doctrine itself. (See 282-283.) We are reminded here of the importance, in Polanyi’s account of the balanced mind, of securing agreement from relevant authorities. In this connection, Polanyi describes “*persuasive* passion, the mainspring of all fundamental controversy” (159), a phenomenon that Polanyi likens to the attempt to convert (150-151). An essential part of coming to adopt a view is bringing relevant others over to our position. As noted earlier, “Our vision must conquer or die” (150). The central foe for the balanced mind is a metastasizing hesitancy that undermines faith and commitment. Witnessing others seeing and enjoying what you see and enjoy is a powerful antidote to this condition. Polanyi’s analysis casts a stimulating and useful light on the evangelism called for by Christianity.

Interestingly, Polanyi sees in the success of historical criticism of earlier Christian belief, and in the victories generally of the critical mind in regard to religion, an extremely valuable gain. He states, “Today we should be grateful for the prolonged attacks made by rationalists on

religion for forcing us to renew the grounds of the Christian faith” (286). These new grounds, having nothing to do with claims that are susceptible to falsification by critical inquiry, are precisely those of the balanced mind, whose faith is grounded in faith and is committed to commitment.<sup>21</sup> As suggested in the grand historical narrative described earlier, the same critical impulse that destroyed early naïve forms of belief, and then the self-confidence of the critical mind itself, ironically possesses the potential to reveal a new vista which is immune to its acidic propensities. The rationalist undermining of traditional religious belief was a trigger that made possible a new condition of faith, predicated on grounds very different from the alleged foundations of earlier and less penetrating forms of belief. This event explains how we can regard the critical movement, including the consequences of eating the second apple, as a gift. This second departure from paradise is responsible for unlocking the possibilities of an unprecedented self-reinforcing, circular faith which returns to us all of the fruits of the pre-critical fiduciary perspective, now heightened and enriched by its encounter with and supersession of the critical mind. The grandeur of what is thereby unleashed is captured in the closing paragraph of *Personal Knowledge* where Christianity is honored and the final word is “God.”

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974 [first published in 1958]).

<sup>2</sup> The compulsion is the result of a loss of capacity to think otherwise. See *PK*, 266.

<sup>3</sup> More specifically, Polanyi understands the task fundamentally to be a “reform of the conception of truth” (204).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Polanyi, “On the Modern Mind,” *Encounter*, Volume 24 (May 1965): 12-20. Phil Mullins has uncovered a pair of addresses by Polanyi that show that he was examining these matters earlier, well before the Gifford Lectures of 1951-1952 that gave rise to *Personal Knowledge*. Titled “Science and the Modern Crisis,” these talks occurred sometime prior to 1945 (Mullins makes the case that they were delivered in 1944). As the title suggests, Polanyi is here concerned with “the crisis of our times.” He states that it is a crisis “based on spiritual or, generally, mental grounds...” (108). See Michael Polanyi, “Science and the Modern Crisis” in *Memoirs and Proceedings of the Manchester Library & Philosophical Society*, Volume 87, Issue 6 (June 1945), 106-117.

<sup>5</sup> “Ominous” is an understatement. The paradoxical combination of skepticism and moral fervor leads, on the individualistic side, to nihilism and, in the political and social domain, to totalitarianism. See, for example, “On the Modern Mind,” 18f.

<sup>6</sup> On this matter see Polanyi’s 1960 essay, *Beyond Nihilism* (Cambridge: Cambridge at the University Press, 1960), 35-36: “We shall not go back on the scientific revolution which has secularized extensive domains of knowledge.”

<sup>7</sup> “But revision cannot succeed by merely returning to ideas which have already proved unstable” (*ibid.*, 35).

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<sup>8</sup> I am reminded at this point of a colleague who frequently argues, “No God, no good” and has even written an essay by this title.

<sup>9</sup> *PK*, 266, note 1.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *PK*, 381: the aim of *PK* “is to re-equip men with the faculties which centuries of critical thought have taught them to distrust. The reader has been invited to use these faculties and contemplate thus a picture of things restored to their fairly obvious nature. *This is all the book was meant to do*” (381, emphasis added). Surely the emphasized sentence is an overstatement, and probably betrays a trace of irony on the part of its author. Yet, it is a telling assertion.

<sup>11</sup> Readers unacquainted with “the paradox of self-set standards” are directed to pp. 63 and 95ff. The paradox, study of which takes us to the center of Polanyi’s thought, is captured in the question of how can it be that one accepts as a reliable guide a standard that is admittedly derived from oneself? Cf. 315.

<sup>12</sup> It is useful in this connection to consider the important role played by repugnance in the face of durance (confinement or imprisonment) in Pierre Manent’s intellectual history of liberalism. See Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* and, especially, the closing chapter (“The End of Nature”) of *The City of Man*.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent Colapietro shows admirable insight into the mind outlined by Polanyi. Its dispositions include “humility, patience, and hope,” and belong to “a passionate yet playful person who possesses the capability of living in uncertainty and doubt for an indefinite time. It is also the portrait of the virtuous person, wherein virtue reclaims its original meaning of strength.” See “Intellectual Passions, Heuristic Virtues, and Shared Practices: Charles Peirce and Michael Polanyi on Experimental Inquiry” in *Tradition & Discovery* (38:3), 62.

<sup>14</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press: 1978 [first published in 1964]), 3. See too Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1965 [first published in 1950]), his most prominent book, for further prominent echoes of Polanyi. On page 1 Strauss asks, “Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does it still hold those ‘truths to be self-evident’?” Later, on p. 6, he notes, “Once we realize that the principles of our actions have no other support than our blind choice, we really do not believe in them any more. We cannot wholeheartedly act upon them any more. We cannot live any more as responsible beings.” Strauss and Polanyi shared the same publisher. Might they have been reading one another’s work?

<sup>15</sup> In *Science, Faith and Society*, a work earlier than *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi is strikingly explicit on this matter: “We may try to penetrate one step further by asking what the grounds are on which we hold the conviction that truth is real, that there is a general love of truth among men and a capacity to find it? These convictions (and others closely related to them, like the belief in justice and charity) have recently become involved in a fateful crisis...[which is a component of] the general crisis in which our civilization is involved to-day” (73-74). The account which follows of the genesis of this crisis is fascinating. Of great significance to the present study is that the balanced mind elaborated in *Personal Knowledge* is the remedy to this crisis. *Science, Faith and Society* is a rich complementary source for elements of that mind. See *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946).

<sup>16</sup> It is striking to read Alasdair MacIntyre on this point: “There is no such thing as justification as such, just as there is no such thing as justification independent of the context of any tradition...the first principles of such a theory are not justified or unjustified independently of the theory as a whole.” This is from *Whose Justice?, Which Rationality?*, 252, cited in Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 232.

<sup>17</sup> Earlier on the same page, Polanyi states, “Seen in the round, man stands at the beginning and at the end, as begetter and child of his own thought. Is he speaking to himself in a language he alone can understand?” (265)

<sup>18</sup> An interesting question is whether the gifts keep coming. If inquiry never ends, and this is certainly Polanyi’s preferred human destiny, might there sometime be a *third* apple? That is, is it not conceivable that the balanced mind in some sense will be seen through and superseded? (This possibility was first brought to my attention by Collin Barnes.) Due to the very nature of these phenomena, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine such a development.

<sup>19</sup> See 284: “The acceptance of the Christian faith does not express the assertion of observable facts and consequently you cannot prove or disprove Christianity by experiments or factual records.” Over the years I have heard several well educated and intelligent colleagues assert precisely the opposite, viz., that if there were no

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factual support for Christianity they would no longer believe. It is evident that Polanyi would consider these individuals confused, and in the grips of what philosophers call a “category error.” We can scarcely resolve this difficult issue here. At the least, it is clear that Polanyi’s position is controversial. His portrayal of Christianity is, however, remarkably fruitful in illuminating the fiduciary frame of mind.

<sup>20</sup> In his insightful and lucid analysis of Polanyi and Peirce’s views on the nature of inquiry, Colapietro remarks, “For both Peirce and Polanyi, the emphasis falls on learning and discovery, not knowing. Self-corrective processes and practices replace self-warranting cognitions or truths...so that everything is, in principle, open to revision and reappraisal.” This leads Colapietro later to refer to “the heuristic road.” He makes the penetrating additional point that Polanyi’s inquiry into inquiry is a means of protecting the integrity of this important human practice. See Colapietro (note 13 above), 54-56

<sup>21</sup> We can anticipate passionate protest from a variety of Christian believers who find facts to be important indeed. In response to the vehement allegation that Polanyi in his account has excised vital realities, one imagines him responding in an echo of William James: “What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one or the other’s being right.” (This passage comes from *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981 [first published in 1907]), 26.) It will not be lost on many readers of *Personal Knowledge* that Polanyi, when speaking about Christianity, to a considerable extent occupies the perspective of an outsider. From that presumed vantage point he perceives remarkable wisdom and grand rewards in the Christian life. To the degree that he participates in that life, he personally experiences them. But he is able to discern what he understands to be the central gifts of the Christian perspective without committing to the empirical claims in question. It is evident that he believes that these claims are superfluous, even for those who assert that they are vital. That is, on his view these individuals would in fact lose nothing substantive in abandoning the factual claims, and would thereby render themselves less vulnerable to the disappointment (and potential disenchantment) that follow from their being discredited.