

# Can Alasdair MacIntyre Relieve Grene's Polanyian Regret?

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There is no surer protection against the understanding of anything than taking for granted or otherwise despising the obvious and the surface. The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.

—Leo Strauss<sup>1</sup>

In her address to the Kent State University Polanyi Centennial Conference, Marjorie Grene concludes by expressing regret, and not a little embarrassment, regarding what strikes her as intellectual excesses by Polanyi in the final pages of *Personal Knowledge* (and in the last chapter of *Personal Knowledge* generally).<sup>2</sup> In what follows I will suggest that Grene, and others who read Polanyi in a similar fashion, may be spared such regret and embarrassment. This alternative response is ours if only we join Polanyi in his impressive attempt to achieve ultimate consistency. In this effort the very meaning of “ultimate” will have become transformed, as too will our grasp of what it is to be a thoughtful human being. Our success in joining Polanyi in his perceived calling will be indicated by the degree to which we become less uncomfortable remaining in his company.

The plan for this study is simple. In the opening section we will look closely at Grene's criticism of Polanyi. It must be noted at the outset that Grene's discomfort with Polanyi has multiple sources but the scope of this essay is restricted to just one of these. More specifically, Grene cannot abide the theistic and Christian themes in *Personal Knowledge*. She also believes, based on her own late-in-life emergence as a premier philosopher of biology, that Polanyi's grasp of evolutionary theory is woefully inadequate. Although there are substantial reasons to believe that Polanyi's thought can in its fundamentals survive the criticisms launched by Grene on these two fronts, we will confine ourselves in the present inquiry to her third and even more important criticism of Polanyi, namely, that he at a critical point, arbitrarily, with flagrant inconsistency, and hence embarrassingly, retreats from his earlier admirable admission of the contingency and fallibility of his own position.

As a valuable source of relevant insights on the issues raised by Grene, we will in the second section of the inquiry lay out the central argument of a seminal essay by Alasdair MacIntyre. In this essay MacIntyre purports to show that it is possible rationally to attack a competing intellectual system (and argue for the supremacy of one's own) even while conceding the absence of neutral authoritative foundations to which one might appeal during the critique or defense. Then, in the closing section, benefitting from MacIntyre's argument, and drawing extensively from what Polanyi has to say in *Personal Knowledge*, we will address the question of the adequacy and advisability of Grene's regrets about Polanyi's allegedly unfortunate assertion of the superiority of his own framework and point of view.

### **Grene's Regrets**

Marjorie Grene possesses a legendary vehement voice which is on clear display in her 1991 Kent State fusillade. Her address is primarily concerned with the meanings of "subjective" (as opposed to the "personal") outlined by Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*.<sup>3</sup> In carrying out her task she draws our attention ("PS," 14) to a section of the book in which Polanyi clarifies "four grades according to which we have classified reasonable action and perception" (*PK*, 374). The third of these, on Polanyi's scheme, is "Conclusions arrived at by the correct use of a fallacious system." Polanyi judges that "[t]his is an *incompetent* mode of reasoning, the results of which possess *subjective validity*" (374; Polanyi's emphasis). There is at this point a footnote pointing back to pp. 286-8 where Polanyi has described the belief system of the Azande (a primitive people in Africa).<sup>4</sup> Let us now hear Grene at length. Through this reference, Polanyi appears to provide us with a new sense, and a new reference, for subjectivity: it is whatever is out of accord with the canons of our modern, liberal, science-sponsoring and science-grounded society. Indeed, in terms of the final chapter [of *PK*], on the Rise of Man, it is that particular society toward which, since the origin of life, the whole creation can be said to have moved. Allegedly, the personal is saved from its precarious status by an ontology that places our commitment uniquely within a universe somehow meant to culminate in this very society, with these very fundamental beliefs...And we need worry no more about Zande or supporters of apartheid or Arab or Christian or Jewish fundamentalists or anybody we happen to disagree with. That sounds fine on the face of it,

perhaps. But where has historical contingency, where has fallibility gone? (“PS,” 15)

Greene’s disappointment is manifest. And so too is embarrassment for having been unwittingly associated with this view for so long. What are we to say?

As it turns out, there is much to be said. This criticism of Polanyi by Greene has been usefully examined by Polanyi scholars. As a vehicle for more fully understanding Greene’s position, let us look at the analyses of her comments offered by Walter Gulick and Phil Mullins as well as at some germane comments on related matters by Andy Sanders.<sup>5</sup>

After accurately summarizing Greene’s critique of Polanyi, Gulick offers an extended commentary that mingles penetrating with misleading remarks. Early on, after showing that Polanyi more than once equates “subjectivity with error” (“TF,” 53), he concludes that “Greene is quite right to point out that this is an incoherent and problematic usage” (53). This assertion by Gulick is occasion for some preliminary observations. That Polanyi’s phrasing is problematic is incontrovertible. But it is wise to pause before concluding that it is incoherent. After all, the Zande views of the world (cited by Polanyi) are held with integrity and universal intent and therefore are true as far as Azande are concerned (which is, of course, an aspect of Greene’s point). There is, then, a reasonable sense in which these views can be said to be “subjectively valid.” From where *we* stand, what Azande assert is false and, therefore, it is fair to judge that their certainty on the matter is (merely) subjective (as opposed to the objectivity of our own stance) while at the same time admitting that it is clearly valid by their lights. Greene is correct (as are Gulick and Mullins) in saying that Polanyi’s language regarding subjectivity creates confusion, but such difficulty need not entail incoherence. Gulick shortly thereafter aptly observes that “Polanyi’s analysis betrays a not so latent positivism” (53). Now, Polanyi’s thought as a whole is a protest against positivism in the most common understanding of the term. But, if we interpret Gulick as stating that for Polanyi there is in fact a world out there (i.e., reality), and that we can be accurate or inaccurate in our statements about it, then his assertion is uncontroversial. For Polanyi, the Zande claim in question is false, for it says something untrue about the world. To say, however, that in doing this Polanyi is *betraying* a commitment to an understanding about reality is possibly to cast aspersions where, instead, one ought to declare that something far more important and respectable has been revealed and ought to be acknowledged. This matter will occupy us in the closing section of the essay.

Later in his commentary Gulick observes that on these difficult matters there is a need for precision, to which one can only say “Yes, indeed; go on!” More substantively, Gulick adds that a significant danger posed by Grene’s exasperated and impatient dismissal of Polanyi’s formulation is “a relativistic world in which truth, an essential value for Polanyi [as it is for Grene], loses its value” (53). To his credit, Gulick in the spirit of conciliation then concludes, “any claim that a rival framework is false should be offered in a modest, confessional manner reflective of the fallible nature of personal knowing” (53). This recommendation is surely congenial to Grene’s perspective and, especially with its mention of confession, sounds altogether compatible with Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*. At the risk, however, of offending the growing irenic spirit, a further comment is called for. When confronting claims regarding reality, judgment is unavoidably called for (all the more so to the extent that one aims to live in light of principle). And, just as judgment is not to be avoided, neither are the consequences of such judgment. It is necessary to shoot the terrorist about to crash the airplane. The Native American apologizes to the Buffalo (perhaps even to the carrot) but still kills and eats it. As Polanyi concedes, and Grene would surely grant, imperatives accompany the mere fact of embodied existence. Matters are far more complex for man than they are for paramecium or horses. But, fundamentally, the challenge is the same for each organism.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, Gulick is sympathetic to Polanyi’s position taken as a whole. He acknowledges the need for straightforward assertion in order to advance knowledge. Indeed, he follows Polanyi in recognizing that human beings typically operate in institutions within which conflicting claims are the engine and which, without judgment and conflict, would not operate properly. Because Grene herself is deeply embedded in such institutions, and has spent a lifetime struggling and at times thriving within them, she herself should, suggests Gulick, be the first to acknowledge these realities. Gulick thus concludes, “Grene’s reaction against Polanyi’s ‘dogmatism’ is overdone” (54), and adds that while “I also don’t see any problem with Grene’s negative assessments” (Gulick is too conciliatory here), he does not “see why she thinks Polanyi should not make these assessments, so long as he does so with universal intent and while confessing the personal nature of his claims” (54). It would be churlish to take issue with such a generous closing. But we are prompted to add that it is when we are compelled to act that things become most interesting, and that when it comes to confession there is more to acknowledge than our personal fallibility.

In his commentary on Grene's critique of "subjective validity" and the footnote pertaining to the Azande, Phil Mullins is more guarded than Gulick and demonstrates even greater sympathy for Polanyi. His comments occur within a larger discussion of Grene's discomfort with Part Four of *Personal Knowledge* (especially the final chapter of the book). In fact, Mullins' detailed analysis of "subjective validity" and related matters occurs not in the text itself but instead in a very long endnote ("MGPK," note 41 on 26). After marking "Grene's heavily sarcastic words" (39), Mullins concedes that "Grene does seem to make a good point in suggesting that this classification [subjective validity] does not fit with Polanyi's primary notions of the subjective outlined in the fiduciary program which presumably applies to *all* human persons, Zande and non-Zande" (39, emphasis added). While stating that Grene "may be overestimating the importance of this inconsistency" (39), Mullins, much like Gulick, concludes that "Polanyi should, however, have avoided the term 'subjective validity'" (39). Attempting to capture Polanyi's intentions better than does Polanyi himself, Mullins attributes to him the view that some judgments are "competent but erroneous" and they are understood to be "fallacious from the perspective of a judgment informed by a scientific framework" (39). For Polanyi, states Mullins, "the Zande witch doctor is a rational person but his rationality is deluded" (39). Mullins goes on to show that Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* admits that one has no choice but to evaluate judgments from within one's own interpretive framework (*PK*, 319). But what makes Mullins' account of the "subjective validity" controversy particularly insightful is his recognition at this point that in this evaluation of the claims of one framework by another we have an instance of what Polanyi earlier described as the clash of "persuasive passions" (see *PK*, 150ff.). That is, competing understandings of reality are here engaged in combat, and there is no neutral authority in light of which the competition can be adjudicated and resolved. To his considerable credit Mullins brings out the utter and ultimate seriousness of the matter.<sup>7</sup> His closing sentence takes us a step beyond where we left Gulick: "Polanyi thus seems to be, once again, simply affirming that you cannot make claims or commitments except from within a framework of belief that is largely subsidiary" (40). As is always the case with Mullins, in this commentary on Polanyi he is penetrating and exceptionally well informed. Still, as with Gulick, the matter is not driven home. What is most significant has yet to be said.

Finally, in an essay that makes no reference to Marjorie Grene or "subjective validity," Andy Sanders offers an analysis that bears importantly on the issues under discussion. He begins

with the bold claim that “notwithstanding his critique of objectivism and his post-critical perspective, Polanyi remains firmly rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment” (“TKB,” 15). Indeed, on Sanders’ account Polanyi, quite self-consciously, is engaged in a project of restoration: in his work he is “drawing attention to essential elements in the heritage of the Enlightenment, elements he thought were in danger of being forgotten and threatened” (15). Sanders detects in Polanyi’s position both a modernist preoccupation with justification and a postmodernist acknowledgement that “conceptual frameworks and cultural practices have their own internal standards of rationality and excellence” (18). The former, says Sanders, is a component of Polanyi’s central concern to meet the challenge of skepticism. Because the defense against skepticism is based on a theory of commitment that includes an “explicit invitation to dogmatism” (16, 18),<sup>8</sup> Sanders is troubled by his consequent growing suspicion that Polanyi’s position is “incoherent in being both relativistic and dogmatic at the same time” (18). Propelled, however, by the belief that the appearance of incoherence is misleading, Sanders probes more deeply and discovers in Polanyi an underlying principle of reconciliation. The key to this reconciliation is to articulate “the proper interpretation of Polanyi’s dogmatism” (19). Sanders purports to do this under the heading of “methodological dogmatism” which he describes as “the principle of tenacity which prescribes that one should stick to one’s theories or beliefs as long as it is reasonably possible” (20). So, for Sanders, Polanyi “advocates methodological, not justificatory dogmatism” (20). According to this view Polanyi still stands for commitment, but the commitment is to the process of arriving at the truth rather than to any particular alleged foundational principle or doctrine. In other words, Polanyi’s endorsement of fallibility (which is so dear to Grene) is preserved. Sanders concludes with a statement that will appropriately occupy our attention below: “We may then see Polanyi as a traditionalist who maintains that now that proof and foundations have turned out to be impossible and a God’s eye point of view is unattainable, we should rely on our cultural systems and traditions as the only starting point for our inquiries available to us” (20). For now we should take special note of the “only” in this statement and we are therefore well advised to recognize that not only “should” we in our judgments rely on the cultural systems and traditions we receive from the past, we have no real option other than to do so.

### **MacIntyre’s Breakthrough**

Alasdair MacIntyre is well known for his decades-long preoccupation with rival moral frameworks and a focus, in particular, on the question of the logical relationship between them. While he has clearly favored some moral frameworks over others, this preference has been accompanied by the admission that each framework contains within itself its own premises for evaluation, and that foundations upon which to predicate moral judgment do not exist independent of moral frameworks themselves. This, in turn, has led to a spirit of humility in MacIntyre's analysis of the efficacy of the various frameworks (including those he prefers) but also to a degree of perplexity on the part of his reader as he encounters MacIntyre's clearly expressed preferences in the contest between the rival candidates vying for our allegiance. Then, early in this new century, MacIntyre made explicit a conviction that was perhaps implicit all along.<sup>9</sup> At this late moment he states his intention to "outline a view according to which, even when the protagonists of two or more rival moral traditions do not share enough by way of premises or standards of argument to settle their agreements, one may nonetheless be shown to be rationally superior to its rivals." He adds, "I will be trying to show that it is possible to establish that one moral standpoint may be rationally superior to others without securing the assent of highly intelligent, perceptive, and thoughtful adherents of those other points of view" ("IMD," 4). Our task in this section is to lay out the details of MacIntyre's reasoning and then, in the closing section, we will bring his argument to bear upon Grene's critique of Polanyi.

The argument by MacIntyre with which we are concerned occurs within a much larger defense of natural law that, given the focus of this study, need not concern us. Emerging in the wake of a summary of the moral disagreement that exists between the utilitarian and Thomist perspectives, MacIntyre's argument begins by clarifying an ambiguity. It is one thing (and true), he states, to say that "there are no arguments that can compel agreement between the two contending parties, that there is no way in which one party can evidently defeat the arguments of the other by appeal to some set of standards that both contending and neutral observers share," and it is quite another to say "that there is no way of showing by means of argument which, if either, is right" ("IMD," 32). The latter, for MacIntyre, is possible. In short, while MacIntyre concedes the existence of incommensurability of positions, he holds out the possibility, in the face of intractable dispute, of rational demonstration of the superiority of one framework over the other. In short, "incommensurability does not leave us resourceless" (32).

How, we wonder, can this be done? MacIntyre begins by noting that moral disagreement between traditions exists within a long-term historical project, internal to each tradition, in which that tradition addresses the same inescapable vital questions that occupy its rival. As a continuing project, each of the traditions ought “to be evaluated not only in terms of its present theses and arguments, but as an ongoing critical enterprise” (33). MacIntyre then asks the adherent of one tradition, in “a difficult exercise of the philosophical and moral imagination” (34), to occupy the perspective of a thoughtful member of the other by asking how successful the latter tradition has been, by its own standards, in contending over time with the vital questions that press upon it. If the conclusion is that it has in this effort been deficient, that this deficiency was predictable from the perspective of and according to the principles of the observer’s own tradition, and that the tradition of the observer has itself made progress where the observed tradition has not, then it is fair and rational to conclude that the observer’s tradition is superior to the one under examination. MacIntyre emphasizes that the success of this judgment does not require the assent of the thoughtful member of the allegedly inferior tradition. Indeed, given the incommensurability between positions that MacIntyre never denies, this typically is not to be expected. That is unsurprising since part of the evidence for the inferiority of a tradition consists of its lack of insight regarding its failures. Among the chief indicators of such failure is that it refuses to recognize, as a component of the internal assessment of its own project, that for its success it requires the resources of the competing tradition. Although it entails some repetition, we will give MacIntyre the last word:

We can, that is to say, compare two or more incompatible and competing traditions as more or less successful traditions of enquiry. And, if one of those competing traditions were to be able to make progress in solving its own problems and also to identify and explain the failure of its rivals to solve their problems, then we would under certain conditions have sufficient grounds for asserting its rational superiority. (35)

One can imagine the reader becoming enraged over what appears to be the arrogance and smugness, if not outright imperialism, of MacIntyre’s position. But this is precisely the wrong way to interpret what he is saying. And in explaining why this is so we again encounter the genius of Polanyi.

## A Polanyian Response to Grene

### *Polanyi and MacIntyre*

Let us begin this closing section by asking whether Polanyi, in his assessment of the Zande perspective, is acting as described in the just-cited passage by MacIntyre.<sup>10</sup> It is indisputable that Polanyi inhabits, speaks out of, and endorses the authority of a framework. As Sanders has reminded us, Polanyi is both a product and defender of the Enlightenment. Further, as Polanyi explicitly acknowledges in his account of his own calling, he is representative of, and indelibly marked by, the extraordinarily rich cultural environment of fin de siècle central Europe. As he grapples with the questions whose examination constitutes *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi, through the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, becomes acquainted with Azande who inhabit a moral and intellectual framework that is both impressively resilient and fundamentally at odds with the intellectually dominant strain of the European perspective (*PK*, 287-294). Polanyi emphasizes that the Zande view of the world is coincidental with an idiom (“an idiom which interprets all relevant facts in terms of witchcraft and oracular powers”) within which it is impossible to imagine a meaningful alternative to that worldview. As a result, external objections to the framework are incapacitated from the outset and the Zande system of belief is remarkably tenacious and hence stable. Azande “unhesitatingly ignore all that the idiom does not cover” (288), a characteristic, says Polanyi, which their framework has in common with objectivism, Marxism, the Freudian doctrine, and even Western science itself. Through the case of Azande, as well as through that of an African tribe for whom a man’s death by a lion attack receives a striking interpretation indeed, Polanyi is illustrating the existence of incommensurable outlooks characterized by intractable disputes regarding the meaning of events (and, presumably, regarding what counts as a relevant event or even an event per se).

While Polanyi’s primary purpose in discussing Zande and other deep and resourceful frameworks is to illustrate stability of belief and to demonstrate that all contenders in framework controversy are similarly constructed (and therefore that the concept of a general, unaffiliated doubt is fanciful), there is more here that commands our attention. In a passage *not* from Part Four of *Personal Knowledge*, a passage that Grene strangely must have overlooked for so long,

Polanyi states, “We may acknowledge the completeness or comprehensiveness of a language and the system of conceptions conveyed by it—as we do in respect to Azande beliefs in witchcraft—without *in any way* implying that the system is correct” (292; emphasis added). A moment later Polanyi refers to “our rejection of Zande superstitions” (292). And, applying the lesson of the Zande perspective to science, Polanyi confidently declares, “The process of selecting facts for our attention is indeed the same in science as among Azande, but *I believe that science is often right in its application of it, while Azande are quite wrong when using it for protecting their superstition*” (294; emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> As will become clearer as we proceed more deeply into Polanyi’s view, the term “believe” is most significant. But let us first complete the parallel with MacIntyre.

In assuredly judging the Zande perspective to be inferior to that of Western science, Polanyi of course concedes, and proceeds from, the authority of the latter.<sup>12</sup> But the judgment is the product neither of ignorance nor prejudice.<sup>13</sup> Azande pay a price for intransigently adhering to their magical outlook. That is apparent to the Western observer. Yet, while Polanyi’s analysis illustrates the core of MacIntyre’s position,<sup>14</sup> it includes no systematic imaginative effort to see the shortcomings of the Zande framework from the Zande point of view. This will strike some readers as odd. In an article published while revising his Gifford lectures into what would become *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi speaks of “[o]ur capacity for understanding another person’s actions by entering into his situation and for judging his actions from his own point of view” and, a bit later, states, “A personal knowledge of man may consist in putting ourselves in the place of the persons we are studying and in trying to solve their problems as they see them or as we see them.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the theme of freely and sympathetically entering into the mind (and lived reality) of others is prominent in Chapter 12 of *Personal Knowledge* (“Knowing Life”), especially in its discussion of personhood. How are we to square this emphasis on the observer’s identification with those he observes with Polanyi’s explicit critique of and distancing from the Azande? If Polanyi is to remain consistent, there must be some limit to the possibility of identifying with members of other cultures and assuming their point of view (a limit that does not appear in MacIntyre’s comparatively optimistic account). Recognizing the issue, Polanyi does in fact articulate such a principle within the very fabric of his passionate call for mutual conviviality between disparate individuals. He states, “A dialogue can be sustained only if both participants belong to a community accepting on the whole the same teaching and tradition for

judging their own affirmations. A responsible encounter presupposes a common firmament of superior knowledge” (PK, 378). “Superior knowledge,” for Polanyi, “*will be taken to include...beside the systems of science and other factual truths, all that is coherently believed to be right and excellent by men within their culture*” (PK, 375; Polanyi’s emphasis). It is “the sum total of what its classics have uttered and its heroes and saints have done” (376). In the ideal of human conviviality, persons achieve a communion of understanding through mutual free submission to the authority of the firmament of superior knowledge. Interestingly, the resulting insight and liberation are, therefore, the product of allegiance to an orthodoxy (which, of course, is continually revised in light of the committed efforts, over time, of human beings to arrive at the truth). Polanyi concludes, “The superior knowledge guiding a free society is formulated by its great men and embodied in tradition” (377). That which is highest in us is “called into being” by learning the language of this tradition and electing, without reserve, to live in obedience to it. But it is precisely the absence of *this* superior knowledge that makes Azande fundamentally different from the European and accounts for Polanyi’s judgment of their inferiority. This absence constitutes the limitation that impedes occupying the perspective of the actor in the other culture—a limitation that is prominent in Polanyi and not recognized by MacIntyre.

Polanyi is nevertheless much like MacIntyre in recognizing that the scientific framework is superior for being able more effectively to contend with life challenges that are evident to the scientist; and he appears to concur with MacIntyre in predicating the superiority of the scientific framework in part on the failure of the Zande framework to recognize its need for it. But where MacIntyre maintains that the shortcomings of the Zande framework should be evident to the thoughtful member of the Zande community (but, understandably, may not), Polanyi executes a simpler, less sophisticated judgment. Which of the approaches, we wonder, grants a greater respect to Azande? Polanyi certainly is differently impressed with and more greatly confined by the implications of incommensurability than is MacIntyre. Would Polanyi’s adoption of MacIntyre’s apparently more sensitive and nuanced mechanism for assertion of framework superiority insulate him from Grene’s critique? Or, would she be just as dismissive of MacIntyre’s judgments of such superiority as she is of those expressed by Polanyi?

*Response to Grene’s Allegations*

The moment has arrived to articulate a Polanyian response to Grene's sarcastic critique of "subjective validity," and her disdain for the related assertion of framework superiority, at the close of her 1991 address. As for the former, while everyone agrees that this is an awkward and even misleading phrase, Grene's fierce criticism is neither charitable nor reasonable. Let us borrow a page from MacIntyre and put ourselves in Polanyi's shoes. He believes that the logic and intellectual tenacity of the Zande witch doctor and his people is admirable. Yet, from where he (Polanyi) stands, many of the conclusions of the magical framework are clearly false. But we know that Azande, due in part to the excellence of their thinking, possess the same confidence regarding their understanding of the world as does a capable Western scientist. It is in this sense that Polanyi opts to call the Zande perspective "valid."<sup>16</sup> We could, of course, instead label it "delusional" or "crazed," but this seems not only unfair to Azande but also in an important sense inaccurate. Still, there is something clearly flawed about the Zande view of reality and some of the behavior that follows from it. Rather than ignore this blatant fact, Polanyi chooses to capture the relevant distinction by referring to this competent but erroneous thinking<sup>17</sup> as *subjectively* valid. The thinking of the Zande witch doctor is clear, capable, and authoritative but, in the final analysis, it is so only to those who reside within the confines of a framework that is incompatible with what we heirs of the Enlightenment and Western science understand to be (objectively) the case.<sup>18</sup> In short, while a better phrase is perhaps possible, use of "subjective validity" was an understandable response to Polanyi's desire to grant respect where it was due, i.e., to the competent practitioners within *both* frameworks.

It is evident, however, that it is really not the phrase itself that occasions Grene's sarcasm. Something deeper is at issue. With unveiled disdain Grene asserts that with Polanyi's appraisal of Zande thinking as subjectively valid, "subjective" now turns out to be "whatever is out of accord with the canons of our modern, liberal, science-sponsoring and science-grounded society" ("PS," 15). The allegation is as imprecise as the phrase "subjective validity" itself. But this is a comparatively trivial matter. Of far greater significance is the question of what alternative exists for Polanyi (or for each of us) in regard to appraisal. As active participants in the world, we ceaselessly encounter claims regarding the real and true. We find some of these claims plausible or even exciting; others we deem unfounded, incredible, or perhaps bizarre. In each of these cases we perceive and appraise in light of the framework we possess. How else could it be? In his lengthy discussion of "calling" (*PK*, 321-324, and *passim*), Polanyi forcefully

argues that he not only inevitably (and fruitfully) employs the concepts and categories that were authoritatively pressed upon him first as a child and then as a student, participant in a vibrant and rich culture, and apprentice scientist, but also that he is delighted to be able to think in these terms. With confidence he employs them in assessing his own claims as well as those he encounters in life's travels. Indeed, as Polanyi explicitly declares, in meeting, for example, the challenge of totalitarianism, it is appropriate and necessary for the tenets of liberalism to be held "in the form of an orthodoxy" (*PK*, 244-245).<sup>19</sup> There is, additionally, in *Personal Knowledge* a strong sense of gratitude for having been raised as he has. Now, part of the reason that Polanyi is thankful is that he is abundantly aware that the world contains a multitude of more restrictive and less fulfilling alternatives (including, we now know, being Azande).

In her scorn, Grene, in expressing embarrassment at what Polanyi understands to be a thoughtful judgment, fundamentally inverts his position and thereby obscures the most important features of his ingenious contribution. In her undisguised disgust with the final chapter of *Personal Knowledge* ("The Rise of Man"), she exasperatingly states that for Polanyi "it is that particular society [his own] toward which, since the origin of life, the whole creation can be said to have moved" (thus, in a manner irritating to her, purporting to validate the liberal, science-infused perspective). Well, yes, this is precisely what Polanyi is averring though, contra Grene's contemptuous "a universe somehow meant to culminate in this very society" Polanyi would say a universe that, up to now at least, *did* culminate in this fashion (which after all is indeed the case). But there are two caveats that Grene elects to ignore. First, the fact that things have arrived where they are is so marvelous as to be humbling. Second, there is no guarantee that we will be able to preserve this precious gift. Later in her closing paragraph Grene speaks of "the hopelessly anthropocentric evolutionism of the final chapter" (15). This phrase is ambiguous. It can mean, and Grene implies that this is what Polanyi is saying, that the end (i.e., the final cause) of the universe is man and human "superior knowledge" (*PK*, 374-379). The alternative interpretation (that a careful and dispassionate reading shows to be Polanyi's actual meaning) is that the universe has *so far* arrived at this condition (with, significantly, its possibilities). Grene would be the first to concede that, for example, life just happened to emerge. Similarly, Polanyi, no less an adherent of evolution than Grene (though persistently critical of the role assigned by many theorists to natural selection),<sup>20</sup> is stating that, due to the critical and unavoidable triggering role of accidental, contingent, and unpredictable changes in the natural world, man just

happened to emerge, and it just happened that he (and the world that produced him, including the evolutionary process itself) came to be.<sup>21</sup> Remarkable as all of this is, it remains a fact. The question posed to each of us is, what are we to do now? Among Polanyi's responses is that we ought to exploit our admittedly contingent resources and make the best of our lives while contributing to the very treasure from which we so greatly benefit. The survival of such treasure depends upon our commitment to its continuation and our forthrightly taking responsibility for this, the most vital of tasks (and thereby establishing meaning for our existence). Essential elements of this task are to assess claims regarding the world and to do what we can to establish the truth as we see it. In making our way, there is, says Polanyi, no possibility of appeal to foundations external to the framework we employ, sustain, and aim to enrichen. That is to say, the enterprise of justification is necessarily circular. Polanyi embraces this fact with eyes wide open as well as with commitment and enthusiasm.<sup>22</sup>

Greene asks, in light of Polanyi's assessment of the Zande framework, "where has historical contingency, where has fallibility gone?" ("PS," 15). Polanyi's answer would be that they have gone nowhere at all. They are, and here we perceive a glimmer of Polanyi's deep insight, implicit in all our appraisals and judgments, properly understood. The contingency is illuminated by Polanyi's account of "calling" (which is necessarily rooted in particular historical circumstances, as of course it is in one's very individual existence). A considerable portion of Greene's disappointment with Part Four of *Personal Knowledge*, especially with "the treacherous footnote," is attributable to her finding elsewhere in Polanyi's writings repeated expressions of fallibilism. She is correct in doing so. But her subsequent unnecessary embarrassment results from a failure to appreciate the depth of Polanyi's position on the matter—a depth that unavoidably issues from a heroic attempt to achieve comprehensive consistency. Fallibilism is a principle and ideal manifested as a trait of character in the proclivity perpetually to be prepared to concede the possibility that one's position may be wrong. Greene rightly states that this stance is on full display in Polanyi. But, the probing inquirer is prompted to ask, why ought one to esteem fallibilism? Life might very well be simpler and more pleasant if one took precisely the opposite stance. One imagines that a devotee of fallibilism would reply that we should embrace it because it offers the most effective path to truth. All right, so why commit oneself to truth? *Personal Knowledge* is, above all else, a considered response to this line of questioning. What Polanyi aims to show is that to the degree that the inquirer is searching for a decisive

foundational justification for adherence to principle, he is doomed to frustration. Polanyi's alternative response is a majestic one that can be only partially captured here. At its heart is a concession: the search for unshakeable foundations is futile. Stubbornly to adhere to the demands of this appetite is to invite perennial dissatisfaction which, in response to the painful lacuna, prompts individuals and societies to act in a toxic and repugnant manner. Instead, counsels Polanyi, let us jettison this aspiration and replace it with the understanding that justification and meaning are available through a fundamentally different manner of thinking. At the heart of this alternative is the realization (itself the result of fortunate circumstance) that we are party, or have access, to a body of principles and ideals that just happen to be there. They exist for us because others have paid the price required for this to be the case. Now it is *our* turn to play a role in this drama. Why ought we to do so? The answer is that this path is advisable because of the fruits that ensue from acting in the prescribed manner. What Polanyi brings to our attention is that the fruits in question are a function, a downstream consequence, of our very commitment to the principle or ideal. Giving ourselves over to the prospect makes realization of the prospect possible; the reality of the gratification follows from our giving ourselves over to its possibility. Belief enables the result. All of this depends on a capacity for appreciation that is the product of a careful, though typically habitual and only tacitly understood, rearing and apprenticeship.<sup>23</sup> Returning to the specific question, we give ourselves over to pursuit of the truth because of the rewards (both the immediate ensuing experience and the ongoing prospects which it appears to make possible) that it promises. And, because we similarly believe in the fruitfulness of fallibilism we give ourselves over to it as well. We have here a vista of unlimited possibilities made possible by what, accurately grasped, is a remarkably self-contained dynamic. We might view the process as the intellectual and moral equivalent of a perpetual motion machine were it not for the fact that it feeds off the energy and sense of appreciation afforded by a life that must end. But, in partial compensation, Polanyi emphasizes that in committing ourselves to and enlisting in the perpetuation of that which we cherish, we are participating in a spectacle that has existed from the beginning of time and, with appropriate action by relevant beings, may well endure indefinitely.

Under Polanyi's revolutionary imaginary,<sup>24</sup> we are deeply, even constitutionally, committed to truth. But in the "commitment to commitment" ("PS," 15) that Grene correctly perceives at the core of Polanyi, we are committed to some *content*. That content for Polanyi is

the contingent principles and ideals (the culture and civilization) of which he is very much a product and to which he is devoting his life. These principles and ideals either are, or give rise to, those features of Polanyi's work that Grene prizes. But Grene at the critical moment appears to overlook the deeper insight of Polanyi regarding the contingency of our principled enterprise as well as its essential circularity. Polanyi does remain a fallibilist. In doing so, he is consistent on what we might term a shallow level. But he is consistent in a considerably more profound sense when, out of his background and commitment, he straightforwardly, but typically with a measure of compassion and humility, judges others to be in error. Were he not to do so, not only would he sacrifice consistency, he would have destroyed the grounds for meaning. Given that establishment of such meaning is the very *raison d'être* for his work, this is the last thing we could reasonably expect him to do.

### *MacIntyre, Grene, and Polanyi*

We can see, then, that the profound epistemological depth of Polanyi's allegiance to consistency is revealed in the seemingly superficial (and, for Grene, "dogmatic") assertion that Zande thinking, while "subjectively valid," is nonetheless wrong. Let us now ask whether there is anything in MacIntyre's contribution that might spare Polanyi Grene's censure or, more generally, serve to strengthen his account.

MacIntyre, it will be recalled, asserts that it is possible for one framework or tradition rationally to assert its superiority to another with which it is incommensurable without recourse to neutral independent standards (which are in any case non-existent). Making a judgment of superiority possible is a three-pronged assessment: 1) the observer's tradition makes progress where the observed tradition does not; 2) such failure to make progress was predictable from the perspective of the observer's tradition; and, what is most distinctive about MacIntyre's argument, 3) through a difficult and impressive imaginative effort, the observer, in occupying the perspective of a thoughtful member of the observed tradition, recognizes that the observed tradition is failing to make progress on vital matters. In our own exercise of the imagination, let us reflect on how Grene would respond to MacIntyre's schema. On the first of the prongs one suspects that Grene would with some force observe that the evaluation is circular: the observer presupposes what is in question not only by judging that the observed tradition is failing to make progress on a relevant issue but also on the identification of what counts as a relevant issue. On

the second prong, Grene might very well question the very significance of the prediction. After all, by what right does the observing tradition judge that it is a shortcoming for the observed tradition not to be preoccupied with matters that the observed tradition may not, by its own lights, find significant? As for the third prong, one imagines from Grene an angry squint. Certainly it is a formidable task to occupy the perspective of an actor with whom one has so little in common and whose framework is admittedly incommensurable with one's own. How could the observer ever arrive at a non-circular confidence that a particularly resourceful representative of the observed tradition would in fact recognize the failure of that tradition to contend with a vital issue? One suspects that Grene would construe this highly regarded imaginative effort as a cleverly concealed form of dogmatism (a conclusion we might also associate with Polanyi, given that cross-framework tourism must, for him, be impossible in light of the role played by framework idiom). In sum, Grene's tenacious fallibilism, reinforced by her deep suspicion, appears impregnable to MacIntyre's innovative thrust. The most she would grant is that one tradition or framework proves, and may continue to prove, more accurate and resourceful than another. But in this judgment we may always be wrong. It is simply too much to assert the superiority of a tradition or framework in a manner more certain than this. Even if Polanyi had known of and embraced MacIntyre's argument, it would have done nothing to spare him Grene's exasperation and criticism.

But let us for a moment remove ourselves from Grene's angry surveillance. Is Polanyi any the worse off for not adopting as a comprehensive strategy MacIntyre's three-pronged mechanism for evaluating and otherwise contending with incommensurable frameworks? This is definitely not the case because Polanyi for important reasons would himself find MacIntyre's argument deficient. There is for Polanyi nothing in itself offensive about MacIntyre's schema. The problem is that it fails to go far enough, leaving the truly important work undone. Just as Polanyi would not be Polanyi if he simply embraced Grene's version of fallibilism, he would not be the uniquely seminal contributor we have come to respect if he were satisfied with, and proceeded no further than, the position articulated by MacIntyre. For Polanyi to depend solely on MacIntyre's innovative move would weaken and cheapen his position by exclusively investing in a strategy that, while purporting to enable rational assessment of competing frameworks or traditions, would in fact have undermined, or at least distracted us from, the distinctive genius of *Personal Knowledge* by suggesting that it is possible to avoid the ultimate

epistemological circularity and related radical personal responsibility from which it arose. This observation calls for some explanation.

*The Personal Implications and Philosophical Consequences of Consistency*

The remarks that follow pertain to what Polanyi calls “balance of mind,” a metaphor for having arrived at the deep and subtle understanding of truth and justification that *Personal Knowledge* is intended to establish. Since this is a subject that has been thoroughly examined elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> we will here present only a partial account of that human ideal.

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; Polanyi’s emphasis). Polanyi then articulates 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). 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.

Each of us is born into a particular set of circumstances. Rather than deny our particularity, Polanyi 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. 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; Polanyi’s emphasis). 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.

In this account of the balanced mind, both commitment and submission are prominent. 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). Polanyi is second to none in wishing to know, but the mark of arriving at the truth has changed. He states, "*truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it*" (305; Polanyi's emphasis). 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. There is, then, a depth and drama to Polanyi's encounter with incommensurable traditions and frameworks that is altogether overlooked in Grene's critique and is absent from MacIntyre's ingenious formula for addressing intractable moral disagreement.<sup>26</sup>

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 (a stricture still operating, albeit creatively, in MacIntyre’s schema) 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 account, 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 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. 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). This assertion is an amplification of an earlier statement from the same page: “Seen in the round, man stands at the beginning and at the end, as begetter and child of his own thought.”

It is this understanding of the nature of justification and the meaning of truth that is oddly absent from Grene’s critique, an oversight that lends the critique a superficial plausibility. And, because Polanyi’s deep analysis, spawned by an uncompromising commitment to consistency, is seemingly unknown to and unappreciated by MacIntyre, the latter’s argument not only remains susceptible to Grene’s vehement rejection but it also decisively fails as a satisfactory substitute for the far richer and considerably more resourceful Polanyian tableau.

**May 14, 2017**

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978 [first published in 1958]), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Grene, “The Personal and the Subjective,” published in *Polanyiana* 2:4/3: 1 (1992), 43-55 and, later, in *Tradition and Discovery* XXII, 3 (1995-1996), 6-16.) The conference took place in 1991. Grene later elaborates on these comments. See Grene, *A Philosophical Testament* (Chicago and LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1995), 167-171. We will have occasion to look closely at both sources. References to these will occur within the text under “PS” and “APT,” respectively. In Grene’s response to Phil Mullins’ comprehensive review of her encounter with Polanyi, she indicates that her primary concern is that he has in the close of *Personal Knowledge* become “dogmatic.” See “Reply to Phil Mullins” in *The Philosophy of Marjorie Grene*, Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn, eds. (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2002), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962 [first published in 1958]). References to this book will occur in the text under “PK.”

<sup>4</sup> Grene refers to this as “the treacherous footnote” (*APT*, 171). An indispensable resource in gaining a fuller understanding of Grene’s criticism of Polanyi, including but extending well beyond the issue addressed in the present study, is Walter Gulick, “That ‘Treacherous Footnote’: Assessing Grene’s Critique of Polanyi” in *Tradition &*

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*Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2 (2010-2011), 45-57. Citation to this essay will occur in the text under “TF.” As we shall see, while Gulick offers a penetrating and quite useful analysis of Grene’s critique of Polanyi’s observations regarding Azande, like Grene (but to a lesser degree) he fails to fully appreciate the practical consequences and thereby the philosophical significance of Polanyi’s assertion.

<sup>5</sup> Mullins wrote the essay on Grene’s connection to Polanyi in *The Philosophy of Marjorie Grene* (cited above), 31-60. Other essays by Mullins on Grene include “Vintage Marjorie Grene: A Review Essay on **A Philosophical Testament**” in *Tradition & Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1 (2010-2011), 33-45; “In Memoriam: Marjorie Grene” in Vol. XXXVI, No. 1 (2009-2010), 55-69; and “Marjorie Grene and Personal Knowledge” in Vol. XXXVII, No. 2 (2010-2011), 20-44. Citations to the last of these will occur in the text under “MGPK.” The essay by Sanders is “Tacit Knowing—Between Modernism and Postmodernism: A Problem of Coherence” in *Tradition & Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2 (1991-1992), 15-21. Citation to this essay will occur in the text under “TKB.”

<sup>6</sup> Returning to Polanyi, in this recognition of unavoidable judgment, we are reminded of the candid account of science offered in *Science, Faith and Society*. Sometimes research, regardless of the integrity, effort, and commitment of the inquirer, will be ignored or even squashed. In the normal conduct of science tragedy will occasionally occur. But what is the alternative? Not to judge, not to rule in terms of the canons of the discipline, is effectively to destroy the enterprise. To permit recognition of our fallibility to inhibit judgment and action is a recipe for disaster.

<sup>7</sup> The matter is made clear with Polanyi’s words: “different systems of acknowledged competences are separated by a logical gap, across which they threaten each other by their persuasive passions. They are contesting each other’s mental existence” (from *PK*, 319). It is instructive, as well as puzzling, that this statement and the important surrounding discussion appear in the chapter on Commitment, the portion of *Personal Knowledge* that Grene seemingly most highly esteemed, even to the end.

<sup>8</sup> Sanders is here referring to *Personal Knowledge* where, in his passionate close to the chapter on “The Logic of Affirmation” (itself within Part Three, “The Justification of Personal Knowledge”), Polanyi himself characterizes his view as “[t]his invitation to dogmatism” (268).

<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Intractable Moral Disagreements” in *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics*, edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009, 1-52). (A portion of the essay is a revision of an earlier piece published in 2006, though the section upon which we will dwell is evidently new.) This quoted passage appears on page 4. Citation to this essay will occur in the text under “IMD.” The argument may in past years have been more than implicit. In a note at the close of the essay, MacIntyre states that he offered versions of it as long ago as 1977 and 1988.

<sup>10</sup> For an early and puzzlingly inaccurate interpretation and flawed critical analysis of Polanyi by MacIntyre, see the 1977 essay, “Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science” in Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 16-17. Were it germane to the present enterprise, we might argue that MacIntyre’s critique of Polanyi in this essay is predicated on premises that are inconsistent with the grounds for his contribution in “IMD.”

In another essay from this period, MacIntyre again shows that he fails to grasp Polanyi (as is made clear, remarkably enough, by a response to it by Marjorie Grene!). See MacIntyre, “Objectivity in Morality and Objectivity in Science” in *Morals, Science and Sociality*, edited by H. Tristram Englehardt, Jr. and Daniel Callahan (Hastings-on-the-Hudson: Hastings Center, 1978), 21-39. Grene’s “Response to Alasdair MacIntyre” follows on 40-47. Grene judges that while MacIntyre offers an accurate portrayal of science, he deeply and fundamentally misunderstands Polanyi in an attempt to disassociate Polanyi from precisely that understanding of the scientific enterprise. Here, too, it is perplexing, to say the least, how MacIntyre can be so blind to what Polanyi is saying. For readers interested in the history of the philosophy of science, it will be interesting to note that MacIntyre and Grene come together on at least one matter, namely, that Thomas Kuhn is significantly influenced by Polanyi, but that this is the result of a misreading. MacIntyre observes, “Feyerabend’s philosophy of science is indeed Polanyi’s turned upside down, while Kuhn’s is a simple—and vulgarized—adaptation” (27). Grene then adds, “Kuhn’s relativism...appears to result rather from an overemphasis on one aspect of Polanyi’s theory of science: the logical gap, both between evidence and theory and between one conceptual framework and another, than from a negligent or vulgar reading of the whole of what Polanyi has to say” (46).

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<sup>11</sup> See, too, *Personal Knowledge*, 318 (also not from Part Four): “Though a Zande witch doctor arguing in terms of the poison-oracle is clearly a rational person, his rationality is altogether deluded. His intellectual system may gain a limited justification within a society which it supplies with a form of leadership and the means for deciding disputes, *however unjustly*. But as an interpretation of natural experience it is false” (emphasis added). What makes this explicit passage especially significant is that it shows that Polanyi is not only criticizing the Zande framework for its intellectual shortcomings but also for its moral deficiency. One thing about which Grene is perfectly correct is that Polanyi, in his judgment of what he deems to be inferior frameworks, is unabashed. Perhaps the central question raised by Grene’s critique is whether in this frame of mind Polanyi can remain committed to fallibilism. To anticipate our conclusion, Polanyi himself understands himself, even in such judgments, as remaining loyal to fallibility of belief, and in her failure to see this Grene betrays a misunderstanding of the deeper levels of Polanyi’s position.

<sup>12</sup> “I shall regard the entire culture of a modern, highly articulate community as a form of superior knowledge...My own appreciation of any ‘superior knowledge’ within a foreign culture is subject, of course, to my acknowledgement of the superior knowledge of my own culture, and this will have to be allowed for” (*PK*, 375). Polanyi’s use of quotation marks in this passage is significant.

<sup>13</sup> As a thoughtful reading by Collin Barnes of an early draft of these comments indicates, the question of ignorance in this context is complex. In saying that Polanyi is not ignorant in his analysis of Azande we mean to say that he is aware of, in a meaningful sense open to, and significantly appreciative of the integrity of their framework and the impressive stability of its constituent beliefs. But, of course, in his critical appraisal of that framework, he does not join the Azande in their understanding of the world. Because he stands apart, there is, then, a sense in which he remains ignorant of how Azande experience the world. Resident in the critical judgment of a contending incommensurable framework is not only an implicit fallibilism (see the text below), but also a provisional confidence that nurtures the assumption that refusing to comprehensively join the observed individuals in their framework is justified and is, indeed, logically entailed by the commitment to one’s own understanding of reality and truth. This clarification makes it all the easier to understand Grene’s gimlet eye which, we still want to say, leads her astray in regard to Polanyi. An interesting question growing out of these reflections is whether we might miss something significant in refusing to join the participants in their immersion in the observed framework. It is an aspect of fallibilism always to grant this possibility. But, as is noted in the text, we must ask, what is the alternative? A deeply significant element of Polanyi’s position, one that demonstrates its maturity (albeit at the cost of some fear and trembling), is that a sort of loneliness is unavoidable. We cannot responsibly refrain from critical judgment and the associated commitment to and residence in an admittedly personal framework. We might always be wrong in doing so. But we might also be wrong in not doing so. Among Polanyi’s greatest contributions is to confront this situation candidly, and to see in it the condition for arriving at a genuine meaning that, it would appear, is the most that human existence can offer. Is this, even in its grandeur, enough? (Where does one turn to answer *this* question?)

<sup>14</sup> Polanyi would surely agree when MacIntyre asserts that, “if one of [the] competing traditions were to be able to make progress in solving its own problems and also to identify and explain the failure of its rivals to solve their problems, then we would under certain conditions have sufficient grounds for asserting its rational superiority.”

<sup>15</sup> Polanyi, “On the Introduction of Science into Moral Subjects,” in Fred Schwartz, ed., *Psychological Issues*, Volume VIII, Number 4, (Monograph 32), 82-97, titled “Scientific Thought and Social Reality: Essays by Michael Polanyi” (New York: International Universities Press, 1974). This is a reprint of the article, first published in *Cambridge Journal*, 7 (January): 195-207, 1954. The cited passages are from pages 94 and 96.

<sup>16</sup> In this regard at least, Polanyi does in fact demonstrate the imaginative effort to understand the other that is at the core of MacIntyre’s position. In his classification of appraisals, Polanyi uses for the sort of thinking found among Azande the phrase, “action or perception satisfying subjective, illusory standards” (*PK*, 363). In her paraphrase of Polanyi on this matter, Grene portrays this as “Conclusions arrived at by the correct use of a fallacious system. This is an incompetent mode of reasoning, the results of which possess subjective validity” (“PS,” 15). Grene’s paraphrase of Polanyi is potentially problematic. It is true in a sense that Azande practice “an incompetent mode of reasoning” if we view such thinking as a whole, including its unacceptable conclusions (and downplay the satisfaction of standards mentioned by Polanyi). But this is to shift our attention from Polanyi’s

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focus upon the competence of the reasoning of the Zande witch doctor (which, of course, prompts Polanyi to employ the term “validity” in the first place).

<sup>17</sup> See the prior note.

<sup>18</sup> In a very strange maneuver, Grene launches a *reductio ad absurdum* in which Polanyi’s granting of subjective validity to competent reasoning within flawed frameworks purportedly entails that “we need worry no more about Zande or supporters of apartheid or Arab or Christian or Jewish fundamentalists or anybody we happen to disagree with” (15). This is a bizarre move because despite whatever approval of Zande thinking might be read into its “subjective validity,” Polanyi quite clearly is forthrightly critical of it on both intellectual and moral grounds. Although she surely did not mean to be read in this manner, Grene’s argument here can be interpreted as an allegation of moral relativism. That she can both suggest this and accuse Polanyi of dogmatism indicates that in the face of the deep and profound questions raised by Polanyi she blinks while he, as we shall see, remains focused and consistent to the end. It is telling that in Polanyi’s theory of commitment, which Grene embraced, despite her misgivings regarding Part Four of *Personal Knowledge*, to the very end of her life, Polanyi states, “though every person may believe something different to be true, there is only one truth” (PK, 315).

<sup>19</sup> “Can we face the fact that, no matter how liberal a free society may be, it is also profoundly conservative?” And, a few sentences later: “To uphold the independence of thought implemented by such a society is to subscribe to a kind of orthodoxy...” (PK, 244).

<sup>20</sup> John F. Haught and D. M. Yeager make the additional useful and striking observation that, for Polanyi, “[t]he theory of selection by reproductive advantage is a powerful explanatory device, but it does not explain evolution.” See “Polanyi’s Finalism” in *Zygon*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1997), 558.

<sup>21</sup> Contingent and accidental factors *release* principles inherent in the evolutionary process; they do not *produce* them. Complicating the picture for Polanyi, and surely offensive to Grene, is the existence for him of “ordering principles” in the universe. We are now on the periphery of the thicket of emergence and emergentism (as well as teleology). This is extraordinarily complicated territory. See Jon Fennell, “Is Polanyi’s Emergence Reductive?,” *Appraisal*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter 2017), 22-35.

<sup>22</sup> See PK, 299. Cf. Fennell, *op. cit.*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1104b and Plato, *Republic*, 402a. Perhaps the principal insight of Polanyi’s remarkable enterprise is his recognition of the absolutely fundamental and vital role of education, broadly understood. “Initiation” might be the more apt term, and in considering this we are forcefully reminded of Polanyi’s repeated emphasis on the importance of cultural and institutional affiliation and participation.

<sup>24</sup> See Jon Fennell, “Polanyi’s Revolutionary Imaginary” in Charles Looney, editor, *Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi and the Critique of Modernity: Pluralist and Emergentist Directions*, forthcoming in 2017.

<sup>25</sup> See Jon Fennell, “‘Balance of Mind’: Polanyi’s Response to the Second Apple and the Modern Predicament,” a so-far unpublished paper presented at the 2016 San Antonio annual meeting of The Polanyi Society and available at [polanysociety.org/2016pprs/Fennell-Balance-of-Mind-Ppr9-11-16.pdf](http://polanysociety.org/2016pprs/Fennell-Balance-of-Mind-Ppr9-11-16.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> And yet, Polanyi, in not attempting to win over the Azande through the exercise of persuasive passion, seems uninterested in conquering *them*. Is this not curious? A preliminary response to this concern is to note that the very public declaration of the shortcomings of the Zande framework is an expression of conquest. More deeply significant, however, is a second observation: Persuasive passion operates only where there is a relevant audience (in this case including, it would seem, both Grene and MacIntyre). The stature of Azande does not itself give rise to persuasive passions because their framework poses no threat to Polanyi and does not realistically vie for his or our allegiance. Of course, Polanyi is very much concerned with winning over those more proximal parties who would use the existence of the Zande and other incommensurable frameworks to support allegations at odds with Polanyi’s position. This constitutes the more important instance of conquering for Polanyi. We might say, then, that while Polanyi is clearly ardent, he is not, strictly speaking, practicing evangelism. (We are indebted to Collin Barnes for this line of reflection.)