

Exploring the Underground: Silent Assumptions and Social Pathologies

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ABSTRACT

*Convinced that reason is far from transparent to itself, Michael Polanyi, even in the earliest of his non-scientific texts, sets about the work of exposing the influence of unacknowledged presuppositions, commitments, and mental dispositions. Beginning in 1950 he identifies certain of those dispositions as “moral passions,” but in earlier texts he explores this feature of experience in a variety of tentative, preliminary ways that mark stages in the shaping of his moral anthropology. Set alongside “To the Peacemakers” (1917) and the final section of *Science, Faith and Society* (1946), “Forms of Atheism” (1948) offers an instructive moment in this development. The three contrasting analyses all point toward and illuminate the mature account of moral passion (and the associated theory of moral inversion) that supersedes them.*

Both good and evil grow in history, and . . . evil has no separate history, but . . . a greater evil is always a corruption of a greater good.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

Although Michael Polanyi first identified the linked phenomena of moral passion and moral inversion by those names in 1950 in the essay “The Logic of Liberty: Perils of Inconsistency,”¹ the phenomena themselves had occupied his attention in a number of earlier texts. The language that he settles on in “The Logic of Liberty” remains stable for the remainder of his career, but an examination of a few of these earlier arguments provides insight into the development of these distinctive notions and facilitates a better understanding of the difference between moral and intellectual passions. “Forms of Atheism,” reprinted in this issue of *Tradition and Discovery*, represents an important moment in the gestation of these ideas, even though the text is sketchy and speculative—and even though the religious language deployed in it is subsequently abandoned.²

“Moral passion” and “moral inversion” are terms that are closely identified with Polanyi’s social, historical, and political analysis of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. The association is so tight that it is important to stress that my intention in this article is strictly limited to early studies of the captivity of reflection by submerged convictions, studies that offer preliminary steps toward the notion of moral passion. It is not my purpose to examine the development of his thinking about the social order (a study for which different texts would be more appropriate). While these pre-1950 analyses prefigure, none entails his heuristic leap in 1950 to the proposal that human beings are animated by something legitimately called moral passions, which can find expression in either humanizing or “inverted” (pathological) ways.

“Forms of Atheism,” prepared in 1948 for discussion at the December meeting of J. H. Oldham’s revival of “The Moot,” is particularly interesting because it was composed only a short time before the solidification of his mature conceptualization of this subject. I will contrast the imagery used in “Forms of Atheism” with that found in two widely separated prior discussions: his 1917 article “To the Peacemakers,” and the *credo* with which he ends *Science, Faith and Society* in 1946. In all three of these texts, Polanyi is preoccupied with the fact that reasoning, for all its power, rests on operations and influences that

affect reflection and action but elude the awareness of those who are reasoning and acting. Though other texts could be examined instead of or in addition to these three, these particular arguments enable us to see that at different times Polanyi imaged these influences quite differently: in one case as a fatal “idea,” then as the pull of “transcendent obligations,” and, in “Forms of Atheism,” as the continuing influence of the repudiated biblical God. What we see over time is the steady enrichment of his moral anthropology as he explores the motive power that impels human beings to try to remake on a better pattern whatever social world they inhabit.

The Underground Influence of a Fatal Idea

“To the Peacemakers” is an analysis of futility. Considering the horrors of the war just ending, Polanyi argues that the reasons for the conflict are actually to be found in the mismatch between a traditional dominant “idea,” and the technological and economic world within which persons and nations now act. Specifically, the primary source lies in the “epidemics of distrust” that are “a logical consequence of the idea of unlimited sovereignty, i.e. that the greatness and welfare of one’s own state is more important than those of the others.”³ When that thought becomes the guiding conviction shaping the relations among six large states in an industrialized world of motorized transport and devastating weaponry, war becomes inevitable. So long as peacemakers fail to understand the fatal power of this idea, they can do nothing to ensure a lasting peace. Yet this is a conception of states and sovereignty so deeply embedded in the framework of European political life that it has become invisible—serving as the unexamined supposition of all parties rather than being the subject of critical evaluation or contention. Bending all their efforts toward addressing the reasons that national representatives can recognize and voice in explaining the resort to violence, the peacemakers have been misled. Unable to recognize the true problem, they misdirect their efforts, and their well-intentioned work is, sadly, worthless: “Despite the fact that our age has denied ‘all prejudices’, it has not freed itself from prejudices at all. For they are rooted in tacit presuppositions which determine our thoughts without our being aware of them. That is why they cannot be renounced. Only if we thoroughly clarify our concepts can we then take notice of them, and only this can free us from them—if they are false” (22).

In their biography of Polanyi, William Scott and Martin Moleski, S.J., offer this parenthetical comment about the passage just quoted: “In his mature philosophy, Polanyi realized that ‘silent assumptions subconsciously directing our reasoning’ are the basis of knowledge as well as of prejudice, and he came to see that no amount of clarification or articulation could ever eliminate the tacit dimension of thought.”⁴ On the surface, this seems like an apt comment. Although Polanyi displays here his signature argument that conscious reasoning and explicit justifications rest on tacit commitments of which the reasoner is often quite unaware, Polanyi does appear, at this point, to view unexamined, tacitly held ideas as a problem that can and should be remedied by expanding the reach of awareness. Scott and Moleski are right to notice that his confidence here in the corrective power of reason does stand in marked contrast to later work in which he treats the “tacit dimension” as the largely unsearchable understorey of all reflection. Had Polanyi confined himself to arguing that the violence, having been caused by an outmoded concept of social organization, could be put right by a rational process of developing and adhering to a better concept, I would have no quarrel with their observation. There is, however, more going on in the essay. Polanyi alternates between treating this “idea” as a mistaken or outmoded concept and treating it as a “feeling” (24), an “inner moral force” (26), and an object of devotion that is deeply embedded in “our flesh and blood” (24). It is an idea that funds “religious anger” (25) and makes of war “the most devastating crusade for which the religious idea has ever sacrificed its believers” (23). He thus vacillates between treating the idea of unlimited sovereignty sometimes as a false and correctible concept and other times as a moral force or ruthless god. In this shift from the register of faulty intellectual premises to the register of moral fault we find the germ of the notions of moral passion and moral inversion.⁵

In observing that Polanyi's mature thinking about the *from-to* structure of knowing would require recasting his complaint in "To the Peacemakers," Scott and Moleski leave the impression that the unacknowledged governing idea of the unlimited sovereignty of European nation states could reasonably be thought to amount to a prejudice or commitment akin to all other contestable convictions relied upon in any given operation of rational reflection. But to the extent that Polanyi introduces, in a submerged line of argument, elements that suggest not just neutral social analysis but negative normative judgment, it seems less reasonable to imply that he would later become more comfortable with tacit reliance on the sorts of ideas that necessarily exact such high human costs. Reflection along these lines sharpens for us a very important question: If it is the case that we are all always relying on indefensible and unjustifiable perceptions, bodily processes, passions, longings, learnings, beliefs, customs, practices, and traditions, and if these vary dramatically from individual to individual, as well as from culture to culture, and if it is acknowledged to be the case that much of that upon which we rely will at any given time be to some degree mistaken, how is there logical space to assert, as the theory of moral inversion will later require, that some of these "silent assumptions" or "tacit presuppositions" are plainly pathological? To put this another way: Is Polanyi's objection to the idea of unlimited sovereignty simply the rant of someone who believes in a different "idea"? Or is it an objection raised on some platform from which a relatively nonpartisan normative judgment can be persuasively rendered, a judgment that ought to be intelligible to those that hold the position that is criticized?

Conscience, or the Human Core

In the rich development of Polanyi's thought between 1917 and the 1940s, the focus on the rational reassessment of received ideas gives way to a growing interest in features of knowing and acting that lie beyond the reach of reason or defy definitive rational assessment. The lectures published in 1946 as *Science, Faith and Society* constitute a sustained meditation on what it means to pursue truth once one admits the role of unquestioned commitments and acts of faith even in the most empirical and scientific knowledge claims. He accordingly moves from disagreements in science, where the development of consensus is facilitated by the fact that premises are to a large degree shared, to more intractable disagreements among communities who share few premises. Then in the final pages he arrives at disagreements in which practically no premises are shared, as in the disagreement between those, like himself, who dedicate themselves to the discovery of truth and those, like the romantic nihilists and Marxists, who do not. Where there is no logical possibility of conclusively verifying or falsifying either his own views of human possibility or the Marxist's views, conversion represents the only means of resolving the conflict.

The closing pages of the book seem to suppose some sort of categorical division within the domain of unverified reliances. Polanyi appears to separate the essential capabilities and aspirations that define human beings as human from the vast range of contingent social beliefs, practices, arrangements, and commitments that we adopt as we learn and grow. "To the Marxist," he writes, "this [conversion] would merely mean the withdrawal of his transcendent beliefs from their embodiment in a theory of political violence and their establishment once more in their own right."⁶ Less than luminously clear, this observation certainly seems to require a separation of two layers or domains within the sphere of the Marxist's unexamined reliances. To begin with, it posits the domain of "transcendent beliefs" which Polanyi earlier described as "ultimate reliances" (78). In addition, there is the domain of the entire specific worldview of the committed Marxist—with its texts, social structures and practices, assumptions, interpretation of history, vocabulary, and expectations—in which those transcendent beliefs happen to be contingently "embodied" and from which they can be "withdrawn" and redirected. The deeper layer represents something that Polanyi, at least at this point, considers constant through generational change (83) and, apparently, invariant across the contingencies of cultures.⁷ These "transcendent beliefs" constitute "the very core of humanity in [the person]" (82). He links this core to "conscience," by which he means an indeterminate

“susceptibility” to “obligations” (82), especially, “transcendent obligations” such as fidelity to “truth, justice, and charity” (83). These compelling duties—which, in modernity, are frequently ridiculed and denied—arise out of “spiritual reality” and are embodied in accessible forms in “spiritual spheres” such as science, law, “the great arts,” religion, and “freedom in general” (81).⁸ The “purpose of society” is only secondarily to provide the economic arrangements by which we secure our well-being; its “real” or primary purpose “lies in enabling its members to pursue their transcendent obligations” (83)—which no one functioning in isolation could grasp, let alone mold into concrete social forms or fulfill.

This distinction of strata underwrites an important contrast between acceptable and unacceptable commitments. At one level we have contingent variations in beliefs and commitments from which arise different forms of life and all the productive disagreements that are a healthy, constructive, and inevitable part of human striving to make our views more nearly true. No matter how contentious, incommensurable, implausible, or unyieldingly held these beliefs may be, they contend, as it were, on a level playing field where all have critics and defenders and where, over time, the community of judgment and persuasion will integrate some array of these claims into a set of common (generally held) convictions and will exclude others as incompatible with that dynamic frame of reference. The excluded views may constantly threaten to destabilize the existing social arrangements, but they are no more dangerous to the human project than the views enshrined in the social consensus. There is nothing *pathological* about cranks, dreamers, and misfits, and a good many of these marginalized voices will turn out to be the ones who successfully grasp dimensions of reality to which mainstream experts remain blind. The problem arises because beneath all this fallible, variable, legitimate, and creative contention, there is, according to Polanyi, that deeper, transcultural level of commitment and obligation that is not similarly contingent and fungible. Our fidelity to truth, justice, and charity is, to be sure, indeterminate, but it is not legitimately contestable. It is indeterminate in the sense that each new generation must embody the human response to these transcendent obligations in the contingent, changing, particular social forms available to it. What counts as justice in a particular social world is, therefore, subject to dispute, but the contention that justice is a fiction deployed in the self-interest of the powerful is not, from Polanyi’s point of view, just one more interesting item in the market place of ideas. Such a contention is, rather, an exercise in self-cancellation. From his point of view, then, the disturbing paradox of modern European thought is that the contingent, cultural beliefs and practices that embody these “ultimate reliances” are so framed as to negate the reliances which fund them. The result is pathological and socially devastating in a way that is not characteristic of contention among culturally contingent beliefs that do not touch upon “the very core of [our] humanity.” In pathological situations, we do not have finite, imperfect knowers fielding multiple interpretations, theories, hypotheses, or truth claims in the heuristic process of testing and discovery. What we have instead is a self-denying negation of what Polanyi believes to be the fundamental (and fundamentally moral) structure of distinctively human motivation. It is a denial that, if fully achieved, would reverse or erase the emergent powers by which human beings came to be differentiated from all other mammals.

Happily, the gap between what is consciously asserted and what is unconsciously accepted as the grounds of action is so great that this final self-erasure is very difficult to achieve. The fact that the “society-forming knowledge of abiding things” (83–84) has upheld civilization(s) for at least three millennia gives us confidence, he suggests, that this “core of humanity” is very durable. Nonetheless, it is not beyond corruption, and he worries that “romantic nihilism” with its “cult of brutality” may finally actually accomplish in practice just that horror of total dehumanization that it speculatively embraces. But the complete destruction of the core is not the only worry. Polanyi introduces here the notion that these distinctively human aspirations—the awareness of social obligations, the capacity for love, and the disposition of devotion—will find expressions or “embodiments” even when the social environment does not recognize them and cultivate them for what they are. When any contingent society denies the human reality upon which it ultimately rests, those expressions or embodiments will destroy what they purport to secure in a paroxysm of oppression and violence.

The Repudiated and Re-embodied God

The trope of “substitute deities” is a common one in the literature looking at modern atheism, but examining “Forms of Atheism” against the background provided by the two earlier texts makes it obvious how different Polanyi’s treatment actually is. The familiar argument is that God, as conceived in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, functions in the lives of the faithful in particular ways (grounding morality, providing consolation and hope, explaining suffering, and so forth); people beset by religious doubts continue to feel the same needs and will necessarily fill the empty space with other more plausible alternatives—reason, humanity, life, nature, democracy, the fatherland, art, or some such. Polanyi instead suggests that a hidden, intact, but disowned biblical God now “embodies” itself in various twisted forms.

The article—really just a set of talking points for discussion—presents a number of puzzles. To begin with, it is not transparently clear what Polanyi means by “God as manifested in the Bible” (§1.1, with similar language in §1.2). There are three good reasons, though, to take the phrase pretty much at face value. First, this was a period in Polanyi’s life when his interest in and affinity with Christianity was relatively robust (despite his self-deprecating comment to Oldham that the discussions left him “with the feeling that I have no right to describe myself as a Christian”⁹). Second, his speculative and elusive remarks about God in the final paragraph of *Science, Faith and Society* confirm that he entertained some conception, however heterodox, of a continuing divine reality.¹⁰ And third, only if we read his intent here fairly literally can we appreciate the substantive contrast he draws between the Greek and Christian worldviews: “The vision of salvation” that is conveyed by the Bible and was embraced by the first Christians “had opened men’s eyes and they could no longer achieve that indifference to human suffering at the price of which the mind of antiquity (from Socrates to Marcus Aurelius) secured its serenity” (§3.1). History, particularly human suffering in history, matters in the Christian framework, and once the alleviation of suffering is grasped as a responsibility, there is, in Polanyi’s view, no going back. This element of “Forms of Atheism” is particularly important, not only because it explains why the Christian God, once repudiated, does not simply fade away, but also because it provides a clue, not obvious elsewhere, to the driving motivation that Polanyi believes to lie behind prophetic social reform in both its constructive and its pathological manifestations.

Since Henri de Lubac’s *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* is the occasion for Polanyi’s reflections, one may be tempted to look there for further clues about how Polanyi construes “the God of the Bible” (§1.2). More insight can be gained, however, from Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.¹¹ Niebuhr, like Lubac, is concerned with modern atheism, and he shares Lubac’s belief that modern atheism, in its most serious forms, is dehumanizing. It is Niebuhr, however, who draws a strong contrast “between ‘natural theology’ and a [preferable] theology which rests on a biblical basis” (2:120). Moreover, it is Niebuhr who focuses on the “human experience . . . of being confronted with a ‘wholly other’” (1:131). According to Niebuhr, “the God whom we meet as ‘The Other’ at the final limit of our own consciousness is not fully known to us except as specific revelations of His character augment this general experience of being confronted from beyond ourselves” (1:130). This is a passage that coheres revealingly with Polanyi’s argument at the end of *Science, Faith and Society*. Although Niebuhr does, to be sure, present this God-who-confronts as the creator, he emphasizes that the biblical God is the wrathful judge of all human activity through the entire sweep of fallen history. Held to account against God’s absolute justice, human unworthiness, imperfection, and self-deception are relentlessly exposed. Righteous schemes for the perfection of self and society are condemned both as a futile strategy for dealing with the wound of sin and as one of sin’s most intractable manifestations. The perfect justice of God is never doubted by the biblical writers; rather, “the question which hovers over the whole of biblical religion” is, according to Niebuhr, “Is God merciful as well as just? And if He is merciful, how is His mercy related to His justice?” (1:132). The biblical answer is Christ, which funds the “Pauline disavowal of perfection” (2:103), and Polanyi has

spoken of his own “very close relationship with the Pauline scheme of redemption.”¹² Niebuhr condemns fanaticism and utopian messianism as “the two evils inhering in the historical emphasis” of Abrahamic religions (2:viii), a condemnation that tracks remarkably well with Polanyi’s condemnation, in “Forms of Atheism,” of (1) the Christian history of religious wars, obscurantism, fanaticism, and intolerance that makes Athenic reason so attractive and (2) the baleful influence of (two of) the substitute deities whose promises of progress and perfection have only compounded social evils.

If the God that Athenic Reason “succeeded in chasing . . . underground” (§3.1) is neither a faulty God nor a false and deceptive human construction, the logic of the argument offered in “Forms of Atheism” must go something like this: The believers who become fanatical in serving the biblical God invite the attack of rational secularists who make no distinction between right and wrong relationships with God; for them, to reject the fanaticism entails denying God. This explicit denial makes this transcendent reality conceptually (but not experientially) inaccessible to them—that is, it drives the operation of this reality “underground.” But being, in truth, what Niebuhr calls “‘The Other’ at the final limit of our consciousness,” this reality is not something that can be “dissolved” by denial or forgetfulness; modern atheists continue to experience themselves as “confronted from beyond [them]selves”—that is, they continue to experience themselves as under judgment, condemned in their imperfection but required to seek justice and to care about suffering. The problem is that they must now do so without the complex self-understanding and resources of the repudiated tradition in which the God of the Bible was historically housed and manifest. That is to say, they must do so without (1) the attendant awareness of fallibility and dependency, (2) the relativizing transcendent frame, and (3) the possibility of an appeal to grace (the hope of saving mercy that makes unworthiness bearable). This contradiction between what is actually operative and what is understood to be operative, between the aspirations and the resources for realizing them, sets up precisely the dynamic that Polanyi will in the next few years identify as moral inversion.

If it is something of a challenge to ascertain what he thinks has been “chased underground,” what he takes to be going on above ground presents its own problems. To begin with, the four “substitute deities” are not operationally the same and (probably for that reason) are not, in Polanyi’s view, equally objectionable.

“Athene, the goddess of reason” (§1.2) is a force comparable to and contending against “God as manifested in the Bible.” Although Athene fails to “dissolve” the biblical God; she gains a victory of sorts in vanquishing arrogant and intolerant religious postures that overreach human capabilities by claiming to possess eternal truth. Athene is definitely not, as the other three seem to be, a disguised, partial, and warped “embodiment” of the underground God. In fact, Polanyi admits to being positively drawn to this relatively wholesome substitute deity, with her strong truth-seeking bent.

The three other gods—Clio (History), Dionysus (Individualism), and Prometheus (Political Reform)—have nothing to recommend them; the sole concession he makes is the admission that Clio is formed from an apprehension of the very real power of historical forces, some of which, such as “the British sense of national brotherhood,” exercise a very strong appeal even to his own “heart” (§3.2). While he suggests at one point that they may all be “part of the divine process,” each being rendered demonic only to the extent that it represents itself as the entirety, this analysis is not pursued and seems inconsistent with his treatment of devotion to Clio and Prometheus as pathological. Among these three, he is really only worried about Clio and Prometheus, particularly in the combination that he calls “revolutionary historicism” (§4.1).

“Riotous Dionysus” merits a sum total of three sentences, in which Nietzsche, his votary, is dismissed as “comparatively harmless in an age whose chief vice lies in moral perfectionism” (§3.3). In any case, he later observes, “Dionysian overbearing has happily lost its major appeal” (§5.6). “Forms of Atheism” thus makes clear Polanyi’s reluctance to join other advocates of the recovery of tradition in identifying

modern individualism as a primary adversary. It hardly seems outrageous to speculate that he included individualism among the deceptive gods both to acknowledge concerns voiced by others in Oldham's circle (T. S. Eliot comes to mind) and to make the point that he considered their concern to be misplaced. Still, even on that reading, his remarks would have to be understood as more than a sly and offhand collegial reprimand. In 1948, he published "The Case for Individualism," making it seem remarkable that it even occurred to him to include individualism in his pantheon of distorted substitute deities.¹³ However, his 1951 volume *The Logic of Liberty* reveals the complexity of his thinking about freedom. In his preface to that book, he differentiates "private individualism" from "public liberty," indicating that the "logic" of the latter is his subject.¹⁴ In a discussion of "private freedom" later in the book, he makes the point that most "individualistic manifestations . . . do not contribute to any system of spontaneous order in society" (157). What has only minimal "social effects" cannot constitute much of a threat to public liberty. While there are a few situations (serfdom, for example) in which "private freedom and public liberty are jointly reduced to zero" (158), the restoration of private freedom first requires the restoration of public liberty, not the other way around. Leaving aside such extreme situations, "the scope of socially ineffective personal liberties" is no reliable measure of a free society because in existing social arrangements, private freedom and public liberty are as likely to be "inversely related as they are to be correlated" (158). The very brevity of Polanyi's treatment of individualism in "Forms of Atheism" serves to remind us that this remains a dimension of his thinking that merits further investigation.¹⁵

Hegel lurks behind Clio (History) as Marx is the explicitly named representative of Prometheus (Political Reform). The argument Polanyi makes here about the destructive alliance of Clio and Prometheus is all of a piece with his remarkably stable critique of totalitarianism (on the right or the left) throughout his career. What makes this version distinctive is the presentation of these political pathologies as "embodiments" of the underground biblical God. The first notable effect of this framing is to accent the notion of a moral calling. This puts a foundation under the sense of "transcendent obligations" that he explored in *Science, Faith and Society*. It then allows him to accent the devastating irony of a moral aspiration and responsibility that can only embody itself in patently immoral and destructive ways. The second notable effect is to accent the friction within the Western heritage of the Greek elements against the Christian elements. It is from the Christian side that the drive toward justice rises because it was within that tradition that "indifference to human suffering" ceased to be an option. Having introduced the moral obligation to act to diminish social evil at the beginning of his remarks, Polanyi returns to it at the end. Even as utopian "daydreams" fail and the "deliria of abundance and perfect justice" dissolves (§5.4), we are not able to return to Stoicism or the worship of Athene. Despite our inability to rid the world of evil, we can no longer be indifferent to the plight of others, but are *afflicted* with love—wrapped in "The intolerable shirt of flame / Which human power cannot remove" (§5.6).¹⁶

Conclusion

Although they overlap in many ways, the three texts considered above constitute a progression toward Polanyi's settled notion of moral passion. In the very early essay, he advances an interesting and comparatively straightforward complaint that the analyses being conducted by those trying to construct a pathway to peace are simply not conceptually deep enough. In *Science, Faith and Society* we see a different model. Here Polanyi is not talking about strata of ideas (or foundational concepts) but about strata of conviction in the domain of unconscious *motivation*. In "Forms of Atheism" he reconfigures the structure advanced in 1946, clarifying the means by which, in Niebuhr's words, "both good and evil grow in history" such that "a greater evil is always a corruption of a greater good."¹⁷

Although Polanyi's treatment, over his long career, of the phenomena of moral passion and moral inversion—particularly in relation to his condemnation of totalitarian governments—seems more notable

for the stability of the argument than for the variations, three things worthy of notice emerge from the study of these preliminary explorations.

First, attention to these early texts makes clear the degree to which the development of this line of argument was inflected by religious thinking, particularly his understanding of the theology and social analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr. This is not obvious from the neutralized language from 1950 onward, mostly because Polanyi himself drifted away from Christian conversations and secondarily because he sought to present his arguments in philosophically convincing ways.

These early texts also reveal how little the phenomenon that Polanyi is investigating has in common with any recognizable account of psychological emotions. While R. T. Allen is pursuing a useful project in investigating Polanyi's contribution to the "rehabilitation of emotion,"¹⁸ such efforts must begin with attention to Polanyi's distinction between the appetites and the passions. Moreover, it is important to appreciate the relentlessly *moral* character of moral passion. As *Science, Faith and Society* makes clear, Polanyi's notion of moral passion, construed as the felt weight of obligation, is much closer to what has traditionally been designated "conscience" than it is to emotion. "Forms of Atheism" presents the underground biblical God—the totally 'Other' who calls, judges, demands, and in some sense must be appeased—as the origin of responsible action, not the origin of a rich array of psychological responses.

Finally, attention to the preliminary ventures offered in these three texts enables us to differentiate a little more clearly between moral and intellectual passion. I continue to think that the difference between moral and intellectual passion is far less important to Polanyi than the difference between the appetites and the "mental passions" (a term that Polanyi used in *Personal Knowledge* to include both intellectual and moral passions),¹⁹ but familiarity with these earlier arguments does sharpen our understanding of what the moral passions do that the intellectual passions do not, and it thus provides insight as to why he tends in later work to treat moral passions as the deeper ones.²⁰ Moral passion is the motive power behind action oriented in social hope—specifically in the hope of a communal future that is better than the present. That is its tie to the prophetic. Among our primal human cravings or motivations, then, is not just the implacable desire to understand but also the animating felt *need* to (re)construct a social world of institutions, articulated systems of cooperation, customs, roles, and practices. Moral passion is thus the foundation of action. Were it not for the curb of tradition, the ballast of established arrangements, and the resistance of the unpersuaded, this dynamic future-oriented passion would (despite its beneficent objectives) unsettle our social reality altogether.²¹ At the same time, since we do enter a world already made, this motive force must always express or embody itself within the framework afforded by extant social realities. The passion or motive force can never itself be pathologically distorted, but pathologies or perversions can develop either (1) when there are no curbs or limits on its expression so that it pushes toward chaos or (2) when it is expressed in a social world where widespread belief in and commitment to the humanizing realities of truth, justice, and love have been dismantled, leaving a moral vacuum. In such a vacuum, the plausible tools and objectives that present themselves (both internally and externally) to the hungry passions have been reduced to power, economic (material) interests and well-being, and the consuming, conflictual effort to satisfy individual appetites.

In closing let me return to the question I raised as I thought about Scott and Moleski's parenthetical comment on "To the Peacemakers": How is there logical space to assert, as the theory of moral inversion seems to require (and as all three of these essays suppose), that some of these "silent assumptions" or "tacit presuppositions" are plainly the bearers of social pathologies? The first help we get with this comes from the separation, in the final pages of *Science, Faith and Society*, of two different strata of unexamined convictions. Much of what we think of as the tacit dimension involves the convictions that are a function of the accidents of history—we are raised, formed, educated in a particular context, and we act within the institutions, traditions, expectations, roles, and arrangements of a particular historical moment. But the

tacit dimension also includes “ultimate reliances,” those aspirations that Polanyi presents as features of our emergence and reality as human beings. Pathologies can develop because there is no necessary harmony between “ultimate reliances” and the beliefs and commitments that ground particular worldviews and social arrangements. It is Polanyi’s moral anthropology—which we have seen emerging in these earlier texts and which he clearly does *not* consider to be a feature of his particular, historical circumstances—that provides the platform from which he holds that he can reliably analyze and normatively judge some cultural arrangements and systems of belief to be diseased distortions.

But in addition, as Polanyi’s thought on this issue steadies and gains definition, it becomes plain that the pathology is not limited to the domain of the tacit. There is, to be sure, the mismatch between, for example, the passion for justice and the package of beliefs and convictions that constitutes a worldview in which talk about justice is considered to be a self-serving disguise for the pursuit of power or wealth. But because we are physical, temporal creatures who are thrown into a world already constituted by prior generations, there can also be a mismatch between our moral passions and the social institutions and arrangements within which those passions must be embodied and given socially efficacious form. The moral passions are indeterminate, but not tractable—they *will* be embodied or expressed. A social world that does not grasp their reality is, in some sense, at their mercy. But they can only be embodied in the world that comes to hand. To the extent that social arrangements and social commitments do not support them, their embodiment can only be twisted and distorted—like the embodiments of the biblical God who has been driven underground.

ENDNOTES

¹Michael Polanyi, “The Logic of Liberty: Perils of Inconsistency,” *Measure: A Critical Journal* 1/4 (1950): 359. This essay was reprinted with only minor changes as chapter 7, “Perils of Inconsistency,” of *The Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), where the relevant passage appears on p.106. An earlier, variant version of this material appeared as “The Authority of a Free Society” in 1949 in *Nineteenth Century and After* 146 (Dec. 1949): 347–60. While this essay speaks of “the moral needs of man,” alludes to a process that is the “inverse of Freudian sublimation,” and makes a generic reference to “the force of a blind moral passion” (355), this essay does not include the paragraph found in the 1950 and 1951 versions in which “moral passion” and “moral inversion” enter Polanyi’s vocabulary as distinctive terms. For the information that led me to these prototypes for chapter 7 of *Logic of Liberty*, I am indebted to R. T. Allen, Appendix 1: “Annotated Bibliography of Michael Polanyi’s Publications on Society, Economics, and Philosophy,” in Michael Polanyi, *Society, Economics, and Philosophy: Selected Papers*, edited by R. T. Allen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 365.

²Michael Polanyi, “Forms of Atheism,” *Tradition and Discovery* 40/2 (2013-2014): 7-11. The article is reprinted from *Convivium*, newsletter no. 13, pp. 5–13. Rather than citing page numbers when I quote from this text, I will cite the number of the section and the number of the paragraph within that section.

³Michael Polanyi, “To the Peacemakers: Views on the Prerequisites of War and Peace in Europe,” trans. from the Hungarian by Endre J. Nagy, in *SEP*, 18, 19. Page citations will be given parenthetically in the remainder of this section.

⁴William Taussig Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45. Scott and Moleski quote the passage in a different translation: “our age did not get rid of all prejudices by denying all prejudices. They have their roots in silent assumptions subconsciously directing our reasoning. . . . Only by clarifying our concepts thoroughly can we find them and only so can we get rid of them.”

⁵For my analysis of moral inversion in *Personal Knowledge* and the essays collected in *Knowing and Being*, see D. M. Yeager, “Confronting the Minotaur: Moral Inversion and Polanyi’s Moral Philosophy,” *Tradition and Discovery* 29/1 (2002–2003): 22–48. There are two aspects of that essay that I have reconsidered. I now think that Polanyi’s notion of moral passions is both more complex and more central than I suggested in that essay, and I am now less inclined to argue that Polanyi understands his critique of totalitarian government to rest on nothing more than his commitment (expressed with universal intent) to a competing worldview. To put this another way, I am now less sure that Polanyi is a social constructionist “all the way down.”

⁶Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946, 1964), 81. Page citations will be given parenthetically in the remainder of this section.

⁷Admitting that this commits him to universalism of a sort, he insists that his position has little in common with eighteenth-century rationalist universalism (for his differentiation of the two, see 82–83).

⁸In the new preface to the book that Polanyi wrote in late 1963, he notes, “In *Science, Faith and Society*, I interpreted this [what upholds the creative life of a community] as a belief in a spiritual reality, which, being real, will bear surprising fruit indefinitely. To-day I should prefer to call it a belief in the reality of emergent meaning and truth” (17). It is not clear from this how much of those last five pages of *Science, Faith and Society* he later wished to disown.

⁹Michael Polanyi to J. H. Oldham, May 31, 1948, Michael Polanyi, Papers, Box 15, Folder 4, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, 1100 East 57th Street, Chicago, Illinois. Quoted in Phil Mullins, “A Prefatory Note on Polanyi’s ‘Forms of Atheism,’” *Tradition and Discovery* 40/2 (2013-2014): 4-6.

¹⁰He suggests that inasmuch as untold generations have managed to make “new additions to our spiritual heritage” despite all the threats to the core of our humanity, it is reasonable to postulate some sort of “continuous communication with the same source which first gave men their society-forming knowledge of abiding things” (84). Thus, awareness of the true nature of our human reality and “acceptance” of the “transcendent obligations” have the power to “reveal to us God in man and society” (84). Anticipating some features of “Forms of Atheism,” he even voices the belief “that modern man will eventually return to God through the clarification of his cultural and social purposes” (84).

¹¹Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941, 1943). Volume and page citations are given parenthetically in the text in the remainder of this section. Polanyi remarked in a 1966 interview that in the course of his “gradual [though not ‘complete’] attraction to Christianity,” “the decisive point which brought me into very close relationship with the Pauline scheme of redemption was the reading of Niebuhr’s two books . . . his Gifford lectures.” Polanyi goes on to remark that it is from Niebuhr’s work “that I have derived the idea, borrowed the idea, that our relationship to perfection . . . is one which we can conceive validly only as an irreducible tension.” See Interviews of Polanyi by Ray Wilken/Wesleyan Interview Transcript 3 File, pp. 3, 4, unpublished material accessible on the “Essays and Lectures by Michael Polanyi” page at www.polanyisociety.org. Scott and Moleski establish that both Polanyi and Niebuhr received honorary degrees at Princeton on October 19, 1946, that Niebuhr had attended at least one meeting of the Moot, and that “it was probably through the Moot that Polanyi became acquainted with the theology of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr.” See Scott and Moleski, *Michael Polanyi*, 202, 213, 262, 318 n. 11, and 322 n. 61. They also draw attention to some archival materials, including notes Polanyi made on Niebuhr’s work (Michael Polanyi, Papers, Box 24, Folder 10, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library) and a short manuscript archived as “Opening Address, Niebuhr celebration, New York, February 25, 1966” (Michael Polanyi, Papers, Box 38, Folder 8, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library). “Niebuhr celebration” refers to the events marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the

journal *Christianity and Crisis*. Because Niebuhr was so closely identified with the journal (as founder and, for many years, editor), this anniversary celebration seems to have been promoted as a tribute to Niebuhr (though he was not able to attend because of ill health). The dinner on the night of February 25 is in some places called the “Niebuhr dinner,” and the speaker was Hubert Humphrey, then the Vice-President of the United States. The celebration, held at Riverside Church, included a day-long colloquium on “The Crisis Character of Modern Society.” Polanyi opened the morning session with remarks on the Hungarian revolution. Other panelists included Roger Hilsman, Candido Mendes de Almeida, Richard Goodwin, and Johannes Hoekendijk. The afternoon panelists were Hannah Arendt, Herbert Blau, Vincent Harding, Gerald Holton, George McGovern, and Bayard Rustin. See the documents related to the colloquium collected in *Christianity and Crisis* 26/9 (May 30, 1966): 107–23,

¹²Wilken, Wesleyan Interview Transcript 3 File, p. 4. See also Michael Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” *Journal of Religion* 41/4 (October 1961): 247.

¹³In some bibliographies the title is given this way, in others the article is cited as “Ought Science to be Planned? The Case for Individualism.” It appeared in *The Listener* (a newsletter of the BBC), 40 (September 16, 1948): 412–13. It was incorporated into chapter 6 of *The Logic of Liberty*.

¹⁴Polanyi, *Logic of Liberty*, vii. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the remainder of this section.

¹⁵Zdzislaw Najder’s early, biting critique of Polanyi’s treatment of moral inversion accuses Polanyi of remaining trapped within the confines of Western liberalism and suggests that “Polanyi’s conceptual framework remains thoroughly individualistic or rather, to be more precise, rests on a sort of an individualistic-intellectualistic syndrome.” See Zdzislaw Najder, “‘Moral Inversion’—or Moral Revaluation?” in *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, ed. by Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1968), 383. Although new and interesting work is being done in this area, the question of whether Polanyi’s thought was structured by liberal individualism or whether he advances an alternative to liberal individualism remains unresolved. For a useful analysis, see R. T. Allen, *Beyond Liberalism: The Political Thought of F. A. Hayek and Michael Polanyi* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998). For an argument that Polanyi’s notion of public liberty cannot be linked to liberal, individualistic accounts of liberty, see Phil Mullins, “Michael Polanyi’s Early Liberal Vision: Society as a Network of Dynamic Orders Reliant on Public Liberty,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 42 (2013): 162–71.

¹⁶The quotation is from “Little Gidding” (the last of the *Four Quartets*), section 4, lines 11–12. See T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 144.

¹⁷Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 2:ix.

¹⁸R. T. Allen, “Polanyi and the Rehabilitation of Emotion,” in *Emotion, Reason and Tradition: Essays on the Social, Political and Economic Thought of Michael Polanyi*, ed. by Struan Jacobs and R. T. Allen. (Aldershot, Hampshire, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 41–53.

¹⁹For a discussion of the differences between appetites and passions, see Yeager, “Confronting the Minotaur,” 36–39.

²⁰How Polanyi conceives of the relation of the moral and intellectual passions probably cannot be settled. Although he makes no clear distinction between them, he often seems to treat them as separate phenomena divided along the lines of social action and reflective inquiry. Walter Gulick, however, interprets “the moral passions as a strongly felt subset of the intellectual passions, a subset dealing with ideal intraspecies relationships but, like the intellectual passions, centered on promoting the conditions that conduce to security” (Walter Gulick, email message to author, July 5, 2013). My own belief, as a result of this study, is that intellectual passions are actually a subset of moral passions. The latter provide the well-springs of action, whether the action is directed toward truth or justice. This would explain why, in *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi in one place refers to the passion for justice as an intellectual passion and, in other places includes the passion for truth in lists of moral passions, while also treating moral judgments and intellectual valuations as similar acts of appraisal and therefore “akin.” See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958, 1962), 309, 214.

²¹In this article, I have not given attention to the moderating effect of tradition because it is not a prominent feature of the texts I have been examining. It becomes an important strand of argument from *Personal Knowledge* onward.