RECOVERING TRADITION

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Michael Polanyi's turn from science to philosophy was occasioned by social, political, and moral concerns. He developed his philosophy out of an acute desire to diagnose and understand the ills of his age. He writes, "It seemed to me then that our whole civilization was pervaded by the dissonance of an extreme critical lucidity and an intense moral conscience, and that this combination had generated both our tight-lipped modern revolutions and the tormented self-doubt of modern man outside revolutionary movements. So I resolved to inquire into the roots of this condition."[1] Of course, his philosophy seeks to do much more than this: It seeks to give an alternative account of knowing and alter the modern and mistaken conception of ourselves and the way we relate to the world. To ignore the moral and political dimension of Polanyi's thought is to fundamentally misunderstand it.

This, I am happy to say, is something that Mark Mitchell does not do in his recent book. Like Polanyi, Mitchell seeks to understand a political crisis: "The land of the free seems to be grappling with the meaning of its freedom, and some are finding that there is a world of difference between paying lip service to noble ideals such as liberty, tolerance, and self-control and actually doing the hard work of living up to those ideals" (x). His book is a response to our polarized political moment. It seeks to understand it, as well as to move past the stalemate. The crux of the problem is the conflicting moral convictions of various parties and their alleged allegiance to values like liberty and tolerance. Mitchell sees this political problem as stemming from our degradation of tradition. Mitchell's analysis focuses on the relation of liberalism with tradition. For Mitchell, the autonomous individual, "independent and free from any obligations that have not been expressly chosen" is the ideal type of liberalism (2). This ideal individual is freed from tradition. But the autonomous individual is a liberal fiction. He does not exist; indeed he cannot exist. His existence is a logical impossibility.

Mitchell is careful to distinguish between three types of tradition. There is first the tradition that functions as an epistemic necessity for all knowing; second, the tradition that is the great conversation of the Western tradition; and third, the various local and folk traditions throughout the world. It is the first type of tradition that is the focus of Mitchell's argument for it is the epistemic role of tradition that liberalism denies, and which leads to the further denial of the second and third senses of tradition (22).

The bulk of Mitchell's book is an examination of the role of the epistemic role of tradition in the thought of Michael Oakeshott, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael

Polanyi. Since my space is limited, and my knowledge of Oakeshott is severely limited, I shall concentrate on Mitchell's use of Polanyi. It should be no surprise to readers of Polanyi that Mitchell finds him a helpful asset and ally in his defense of tradition in Mitchell's first sense. Indeed, his treatment of Polanyi seems to be the culmination of his discussion of tradition. Polanyi is the last figure he treats, even though MacIntyre is chronologically more recent. He spends 64 pages discussing Polanyi as comparted to 36 for Oakeshott and 38 for MacIntyre. In comparing the thinkers to each other, Michell argues that Polanyi's realism allows him to avoid the moral relativism that Oakeshott's thought seems to lead (181). He also sees more agreement between MacIntyre and Polanyi (despite MacIntyre's statements to the contrary), though Polanyi more strongly emphasizes the role of unformalizable knowledge. Tacit knowing, more than anything else, shows the importance of tradition as the "from" in which all our thinking and acting necessarily is rooted. Aside from comparing Polanyi to these other thinkers, the bulk of Mitchell's chapter on Polanyi is an exposition of his thought. Mitchell carefully and methodically summarizes Polanyi's thought in a straightforward and simple manner. His exposition covers and explains Polanyi's conception of tacit knowledge, tradition, realism, and moral inversion. I can easily imagine myself recommending this chapter to a novice of Polanyi's thought as a fine and thorough introduction to his thought.

Mitchell's final chapter appropriates the views of Oakeshott, MacIntyre, and Polanyi in furthering his own critique of liberalism as well as sketching the humane localism that he sees as its remedy. In true Polanyian fashion, Mitchell admits that these "three thinkers would not necessarily approve of the way [he] interpret[s] their thought or the way [he applies] their ideas to the liberal self" (199). He sees himself as participating in a tradition in which these three thinkers form part of the subsidiary background of his own thinking. I don't have enough space to explore everything that Mitchell does in this chapter, but I would like to note what for me was the most enlightening and thought-provoking moment—his distinction, taken from Jaroslave Pelikan, of tradition as icon and tradition as idol:

> An icon is a particular embodiment of a universal truth. An icon points beyond itself to the real and the universal, which is the goal of knowledge, yet it is something we can never attain without the mediation of particulars. When we cease to see tradition as an icon, when instead we focus upon the tradition as an end in itself, the icon becomes an idol. The aspiration to grasp the reality beyond the particulariarites of the specific tradition is the mark of a healthy approach to tradition. An idol, on the other hand, purports to embody truth in itself. It becomes an object of worship that misdirects the affections. When traditions become idols, they lose their ability to adapt

> to changing circumstances. They become objects of veneration—or a means of control—rather than the means of encountering truth (201-202).

I've come across this distinction in religious contexts but have never thought to apply it to different forms of tradition. I find it an important and helpful distinction to make, and have already found it influencing my own thinking.

I have two main criticisms of the book. My first worry is that his view of liberalism might be overly simplistic. Mitchell breaks liberalism into first wave and second wave forms, but it might be better to see liberalism as a more complex reaction to a series of concrete social, political and economic forces. Much of the history of liberalism is not a quest for some abstract freedom, but rather a quest for a freedom from a very particular and oppressing constraint at a particular point of time. The history of liberalism can be seen as a series of consecutive reactions to perceived constraints. When new freedoms are achieved, new constraints are felt. As more and more freedoms are achieved, newer freedoms begin to conflict with older freedoms. Many of the incoherencies of liberalism stem from the conflicts between these various freedoms. Liberalism has no good method of ordering and resolving conflicts between various freedoms.

I suspect that Mitchell largely agrees with all I have said, and hope that I am not perceived as nitpicking. A great deal of simplification is necessary in a book of this sort. I would just have liked to see more of an admission to the many complexities and historical contingencies of liberalism. Part of the problem is that liberalism is a contested term. Different supporters of liberalism have different conceptions of it (e.g. classical vs. progressive), just as its detractors do. These different understandings of liberalism are dependent on what one is for, or what one is against. One cannot fully understand liberalism without recognizing the polemical and emotional force of the term. Furthermore, why shouldn't we see liberalism as a tradition? Mitchell seems to admit that liberalism is a tradition when he writes "liberalism has become an idol rather than an icon, an ideology rather than a set of ideals to be balanced against other equally vital ideals" (214). This statement invites many questions. When did liberalism become an idol rather than an icon? If liberalism became an idol, then it would seem that it was once an icon. But if liberalism was once an icon where did it go wrong? Mitchell argues that the incoherencies within liberalism were there from the beginning, and thus it had to go wrong. But is this true? Aren't there always incoherencies within a tradition? The incoherencies of a tradition are often what prompt it forward to achieve greater coherency. Could the liberal tradition have made a proper place for tradition? Or was liberalism an idol from the beginning?[2]

My second criticism concerns Mitchell's use of Polanyi. As I made clear above, I believe that Mitchell is a very good expositor of Polanyi's thought. But I would have liked to see Mitchell analyze the current events he cites at the beginning of the book

through Polanyian terms. For example, Mitchell spends four pages discussing moral inversion. It would be interesting to see if Polanyi's conception of moral inversion can make sense of and illuminate any of the contemporary events that Mitchell cites in his preface. Can moral inversion help shed light on the election of Donald Trump or Brexit? What about the crisis of academic freedom as exemplified by Charles Murray at Middlebury College? How is moral inversion related to tradition? Can tradition as idol lead to moral inversion? How might spurious moral inversion be at play within the liberal tradition? Perhaps this is outside of the scope of the book. But these are questions I found myself asking again and again.

In the preface, Mitchell states that what he has to say "is not new," and that his goal is "to remind those who have forgotten some basic and indispensable truths" (x). I think Mitchell's assessment of his book is correct: there is not much that is novel and new in it. Some might see this as a flaw. I see it as a necessary, yet thankless, task. The task of reminding ourselves of our dependence, our situatedness, our embeddedness, our reliance on the epistemic role of our knowing, is a relentless one. We so easily forget, even those of us who know better. Despite the critique of Oakeshott, MacIntyre, Polanyi, and also thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, amongst many others, a false picture still holds us captive. May we continually be reminded of what we have forgotten until the spell is at last broken.

Endnotes

[1]Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* with a New Foreward by Amartya Sen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

[2]Much of this criticism is indebted to conversations with and a class I took with David Corey at Baylor University. See his "Liberalism and the Modern Quest for Freedom," forthcoming in Leslie Marsh, ed., *Reclaiming Liberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).