

The Doctrine of Liberty

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Abstract:

The following is a speculative essay that attempts to show why the doctrines of liberty as they have often been formulated need to be strengthened. *Skepticism has often been used to found the liberal state, but skepticism alone is not enough to ensure liberty because when followed to its natural end, it does not trust personal responsibility to create society.* Part one of this thesis is an historical interpretation of how the doctrines of liberty came to be founded on skepticism. In it a variety of authors are discussed, but most notably historian Paul Johnson and his book *Modern Times* and also the ideas of scientist and acclaimed philosopher Michael Polanyi.

The second half of this essay focuses on Michael Polanyi's theory of epistemology in an attempt to show why it is that skepticism is incorrect in mistrusting the individual to create a moral world. *Man is not reducible to the sum of his parts and the skills of consciousness by which he knows the world, are the very same things that define who he is.*

PART I

Thus we entered the twentieth century as on an age of infinite promise. Few people realized that we were walking into a minefield, though the mines had been prepared and carefully laid in open daylight by well known thinkers of our own time. Today we know how false our expectations were. We have all learned to trace the collapse of freedom in the twentieth century to the writings of certain philosophers, particularly Marx, Nietzsche, and their common ancestors, Fichte and Hegel. But the story has yet to be told how we came to welcome as liberators the philosophies that were to destroy liberty. - Michael Polanyi in Meaning.

This essay is about the concept of intellectual and cultural freedom and, more specifically, about why pitfalls in the way we have *traditionally* formulated these ideas make it necessary that we redefine them, in order to argue for their necessary existence in the foundations of every good society. Of course, looking from the current prospective of modern Western culture it would seem that society has already achieved this, or at least recognized the need to strive to its best ability to fulfill this ideal. And yet it also seems to be the case that no matter how much the ideas of liberalism (in the classic sense) have been ingrained in the modern Western mind, and especially the American mind, threats to its status as the central value behind society continue to arise. Neither the religiously minded zealot, nor the skeptically minded social engineer, has found in the various arguments for such liberty sufficient grounds to adhere to its doctrines. The evidence of this in the modern world is not only the obvious persistence of totalitarian regimes rallying to extreme poles, such as radical Islam or Marxist socialism, but also within liberal countries themselves; whether such dissent comes from rural religious fundamentalists, or the doubts of ivory tower

intelligentsia.

This resistance to the doctrines of liberalism suggests that either the arguments behind such doctrines are not fully understood, or worse, that the problem lies in the arguments themselves. Of course in regards to the modern day struggle with radical religious states, it must also be added that the question is not always about misunderstanding or lack of strong arguments, but simply religious minded rejection. In regards to the opposite spectrum, however, of those who found totalitarian states for non-religious motives (usually, though not always, highly intellectual ones), it will be the attempt of this essay to show that their reasoning against liberty is founded in an extreme skepticism, which refuses to trust personal responsibility or man's individual moral sense for creating a better world.

Historical analysis shows that the struggle between liberty and authority is not just an idle debate, but something very real and very impassioned on both sides. It is for this reason that weaknesses in the formulation of liberty cannot be disregarded as inconsequential flaws and must be considered as real issues with the potential to explode in violent social upheaval. Putting aside the modern day manifestations of this struggle which have yet to play out fully, the proof concerning the power behind this intellectual debate is no more clearly seen than in the period of upheaval that took place during the first half of the twentieth century. The rise of Nazism, Fascism and socialist Marxism and the wars that ensued between these philosophies and the rest of the Western world are proof that ideas and ideologies are real things with real power.

Unlike many previous periods in history, these struggles sprang more from intellectual outlooks and ideas concerning the nature of man and society, than from commoner causes such as conquest, allegiances, or defense. Winston Churchill accurately described this period of upheaval with the words,

All the horrors of all the ages were brought together, and not only armies but whole populations were thrust into the midst of them. The mighty educated States involved conceived – not without reason - that their very existence was at stake.¹

Churchill's description of this upheaval being perpetuated by the 'mighty educated states' was justifiably accurate. This was a period when ideological and philosophical movements were not only being fought in academia, but literally taking the form of real politics fought out on real battlefields.

But what was the structure of this debate and more importantly how was it that the ideas of liberalism, which had been growing ever more widely at this time under the influence of Modern Enlightenment thought, came under such relentless attack? In his book *The Logic of Liberty* Michael Polanyi proposes that,

The doctrine of liberty, as handed down to us, is intrinsically inconsistent and the fall of liberty on the Continent of Europe was an outcome of this inadequacy. Freedom of thought destroyed itself when a self-contradictory conception of liberty was pursued to its ultimate conclusions.²

This highly provocative thesis will be carried throughout the argument, but before we can discuss why Polanyi considers the conception of freedom 'handed down to us' as 'self-contradictory,' we must first examine how at the onset of the twentieth century, this concept was indeed handed down.

¹ Quoted by Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), p. 13. originally by Martin Gilbert in R.S. Churchill and Martin Gilbert, *Winston S Churchill*, 5 vols with companion volumes (London, 1966-), IV. 913-14.

² Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 93.

A Historical Interpretation

It would be wrong to say that we owe entirely to one point in history the first birth of liberal ideas where free intellectual thought and reason got started, but regardless, we can say with a fair degree of confidence that one period shines out above the rest. The start of free intellectual and critical thinking began with Ionian philosophers in the sixth century B.C.E. and the Greek philosophers who continued this work for nearly a thousand years. At this period more than any other previously, the intellectual sphere of man liberated itself from its magical and mythological interpretations of the world. Free inquiry, directed under the unwavering guide of *doubt* in the form of the dialectic, began to reshape both how human beings saw the world and how they approached answering its mysteries. The basic Socratic precept 'I do not know' represented the founding attitude that shaped the beginning of this new form of thought. Such a precept taught that since *the only thing I know is that I do not know*, the only course of action for discovering truth is to withhold judgment. A thesis presented on one side of an argument must be put up against its antithesis and **doubt** must remain until an undeniable synthesis could be presented. This is the basic structure of the Greek doubt and its influence still lies at the foundations of thought in liberal societies to this day. Through this doubt, the Greek world opened up an entire arena of free intellectual debate and exchange of ideas unrestricted by dogma or assumption. Without this philosophical position, the emergence of modern science and technology might never have been achieved, nor as we will see below, would the

sweeping dialectical thinkers such as Hegel and Marx, to name but two, ever have been able to redefine the history of humanity and sway its future course.

Early Beginnings in Socratic Liberalism

The struggle between Liberty and Authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history with which we are earliest familiar, particularly in that of Greece.
– John Stuart Mill in On Liberty, pp. 1.

The revolutionary concepts of the Greek philosophers, however, were not immediately triumphant over their more dogmatic and religious opponents. Doubt gave birth to the liberal society, but its advent was not met unchallenged. The trial of Socrates serves as the perfect example to show the initial resistance to a dialectic method of doubt, a resistance that carries on to this day and is one of the fundamental tensions of this essay. **The tension exists at the base of modern Western society and clearly too in ancient Greek society, as to what it considers the supreme value and liberating mechanism behind a society's hopes and dreams: *the power of doubt*, or the *power of traditionally held beliefs*, the latter of which is so often just one step beyond the scope of reason.**

For this reason, I would like to digress briefly about the trial of Socrates who was accused, among other things, of corrupting the youth and not believing in the gods of the state (i.e. traditionally held beliefs). Plato's *Apology* is a fascinating dialogue and it is my contention that despite Socrates' eloquent reply, he does not in fact defeat his accusers, especially on this specific charge. His primary accuser Meletus makes it emphatically clear from the onset that Socrates is guilty of *corrupting the youth* by

teaching them, “not to acknowledge the gods which the state acknowledges, but some other new divinities or spiritual agencies in their stead.”³ Socrates begins his response by asking Meletus verbatim if this is his charge against him, to which Meletus replies: “Yes, that I say emphatically.”⁴ That is a pretty clear reply to the question and should deserve little further clarification.

The charge is unmistakably that Socrates didn’t acknowledge ‘the gods that the state acknowledges’ but rather other ‘spiritual agencies.’ Had this charge remained on its original vein who knows how Socrates might have replied, but given his overall stance of Greek doubt, it would indeed be hard to see how he might reply in any specific way; after all, the only thing Socrates knows about such things is that he does not know. Yet this is not what happened and in a spectacular show of elusive rhetoric, Socrates manipulates this charge to vindicate himself in one of the more flagrant displays of sophism in the Socratic dialogues. He does this first by changing the charge of whether or not he ‘acknowledges the gods which the state acknowledges,’ into whether it is that he acknowledges *the idea of gods at all*, and then secondly by playing on the meaning of ‘spiritual agencies.’ By doing this he is able to catch Meletus in a logical contradiction and trump the court out of continuing this line of questioning.

Recognizing the fact that Meletus is bent on portraying him in the worst possible light and that his attack is largely emotional, Socrates, despite having been told the

³ Plato, *The Four Texts of Socrates: The Apology*, translated by Thomas G. West, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp., 74.

⁴ Plato, 74.

charge against him quite clearly, argues that it needs to be restated in even “plainer” terms. Socrates addresses Meletus saying:

Then, by the gods, Meletus, of whom we are speaking, tell me and the court, in somewhat plainer terms, what you mean! For I do not as yet understand whether you affirm that I teach other men to acknowledge some gods, and therefore that I do believe in gods, and am not an entire atheist--this you do not lay to my charge,--but only you say that they are not the same gods which the city recognizes--the charge is that they are different gods. Or, do you mean that I am an atheist simply, and a teacher of atheism?⁵

Meletus, determined to get the worst punishment for Socrates, takes the bait and responds, “I mean the latter--that you are a complete atheist!”⁶ Socrates replies to this, “What an extraordinary statement!” and an extraordinary statement it was indeed for its witlessness in falling into Socrates’ trap. Though Meletus was probably right in sensing that Socrates did in fact doubt not only the existence of the city’s gods, but the gods (plural) in general, his hastiness to make Socrates look as bad as possible makes his charge now logically inconsistent. Socrates is quick to capitalize saying,

Did ever man, Meletus, believe in the existence of human things, and not of human beings?...I wish, men of Athens, that he would answer, and not be always trying to get up an interruption. Did ever any man believe in horsemanship, and not in horses? or in flute-playing, and not in flute-players? No, my friend; I will answer to you and to the court, as you refuse to answer for yourself. There is no man who ever did. But now please do answer the next question: Can a man believe in spiritual and divine agencies, and not in spirits or demigods?⁷

Since Meletus’ original accusation said that he replaced his disbelief of the specific city gods with other ‘spiritual’ things, and Socrates rephrased version says that he disbelieves not only in the city gods, but the whole concept of gods in general, with this Socrates has sophisticatedly tricked the court into saying something that is contradictory; for how can an atheist believe in spiritual things. The court concedes

⁵ Plato, 76

⁶ Plato, 76.

⁷ Plato, 77.

that an atheist cannot do this and Socrates effectively knocked out the accusation from underneath itself. In a seemingly sarcastic tone he then calls out to them, “How lucky I am to have extracted that answer, by the assistance of the court!”⁸ How lucky indeed, but the court doesn’t seem to catch the true irony and Socrates, the supreme doubter, escapes further rebuttal.

As we all know, however, in the end Socrates did not win the court over and despite beating them rhetorically, he never completely convinced them. Why? I’d like to propose a reason for the court’s rejection that eventually will tie back into Polanyi’s assertion that the modern doctrine of liberty as received is flawed. The Socratic dialectic and its foundation of doubt definitely gave birth to the liberal notion of society. Greece was, and became more so, a liberal state after Socrates and Plato; a state where ideas and theories were exchanged openly. It seems that even though the court condemned Socrates, its members and definitely its descendents found a great appeal in the intellectual revelations and critical honesty that *doubt founded liberalism* promoted. And yet Socrates was still executed. The reason the court sentenced him to death was not due to whether or not they thought Socrates personally believed in the city gods, but that they indeed feared his ideas would corrupt the young. The *traditional beliefs* of Greece *through* the gods of the city, were not simply statues in a courtyard or deities on Mount Olympus, they were real symbols for something that is much more far reaching and important to the fundamental fabric of the society; *its*

⁸ Plato, 77.

moral and ethical code. When Socrates doubted the existence of the city's gods, he was thus also calling into question the values and code of conduct held by its citizens. Whether his executioners knew the potential dangers of a society based on such doubt explicitly, or whether they simply felt the potential dangers is something that can't be known. But regardless, in the specific case of Socrates, they were not ready to proclaim *doubt founded liberalism* as the liberator of human kind.

In the final analysis and despite the risk, however, the immense appeal a philosophy of doubt provided in the rise of a liberal state held the greater sway on the Greek mind. The Greeks and their descendants established, to a respectable degree, a liberal atmosphere that the world had not truly seen before and for a time they maintained the precarious balance of doubts and traditional beliefs; thus allowing liberalism to thrive for nearly a millennia. Little did they know that had they abandoned their belief, or truly had followed the strictest philosophy of doubt to its logical conclusions that the backbone of society might have been redefined and the very idea of liberalism destroyed in the process. And yet this did not happen. Though the questions of Greek philosophy continually centered on ethics and morals, they never evolved into the forms that would attack the twentieth century. Neither the radical subjective visions of the world in Hume or Nietzsche, nor the proud objectivism of dialectical authors such as Fichte, Hegel, or Marx were thought into existence, still needing a few more millennia of thought to arise. Of course, this is not to say that their society was perfect and whether its various crises are attributed to a

lack of strong moral sense by its citizens, or simply historical happenstances, this era had its share of atrocity. In the end, however, it was not liberalism that would emerge from the struggle, and as Socrates' martyrdom paved the way for an era of doubt, the martyrdom of Jesus Christ would eventually pave the way for an era of belief.

St. Augustine is perhaps the best person to speak of as marking the end of the age of Greek liberalism. His famous credo *nisi credideritis non intelligitis*, "Unless ye Believe, ye shall not understand," is a good formula to keep in mind when we consider Polanyi's conception of epistemology in Part Two. It symbolizes a turn of human thought that would dominate all of thought's departments, without large scale challenge until the Italian Renaissance. A new way of thinking swept across the Western world as Greek doubts were replaced by Christian beliefs.

Birth of Modern Liberalism

The domination of the church over the thoughts of men lasted throughout the majority of the medieval ages in Europe. Liberalism could not thrive when all sectors of thought were ultimately subject to criticism from the church and its dogmas. In the fourteenth century, Petrarch (one of the primary thinkers to pave the way for the later rise of Renaissance humanism), described his own era with the words, "amidst the errors there shone forth men of genius, no less keen were their eyes, although they were surrounded by darkness and dense gloom."⁹ The term "Dark Ages" probably originated with this and has stuck ever since. It is not to say that men were

⁹ Mommsen, Theodore E., *Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages: Speculum*, Vol.17, No 2. (New York, Classics Inc., 1942), pp.226-242..

intellectually dormant, giants such as Dante, Aquinas, and many others still have enormous impact on modern thought, even if most were more theologically minded than Greek thinkers. 'Men of genius' as Petrarch said, still existed; it was just that something definite had changed from the Greek era. The description, therefore, of this period as 'dark' still exists to this day when talking about the Medieval Ages, even if only informally.

Seen as a "Dark Age" of ideological and social suppression even by those such as Petrarch who lived in it, it is perhaps not too surprising that resentment against church and state power eventually gave rise to the rebirth of liberalism. The crusades, the oppression of the church on science, the influence of the Italian Renaissance, outrage at hypocrisy as seen in the anti-clerical movement, and perhaps most of all, the rising struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism were huge factors in what started what is often called the Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Michael Polanyi takes up the doctrine of liberty from this point arguing, "Liberalism was motivated, to start with, by a detestation of religious fanaticism. It appealed to reason for a cessation of religious strife."¹⁰

Once again it seems that doubt of *traditional beliefs* and belief in the power of reason (a belief as we will see in Part Two that doubt itself doesn't recognize) got the liberal revolution started. It should be noted, however, that 'The Enlightenment' period was not at all identical to its predecessor, the Italian Renaissance. This

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, *Meaning*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 6.

revolution was far more skeptical than the boundless humanism of that era. Rather, it was the reinvigoration of Greek doubts strengthened by new movements such as the scientific revolution (spurred by thinkers from Galileo to Bacon). This was also accompanied by a new antiauthoritarian outlook, symbolized by philosophers who extended doubt to nearly every corner of tradition, such as Descartes and Voltaire. All of this combined into an outlook that saw doubt and reason, not only as a way to discover truth as the Greeks saw it, but as the central component to transform society and transcend the dogmas that were at the source of man's social ills.

The immediate result of this was an era of liberalism in both the Anglo-American world and also Continental Europe. Doubt had once again given birth to liberal society, but unlike the Greek society, as we know from the hindsight of history this one would quickly be threatened by a totalitarian nightmare. Why? It is here that we must begin to focus more directly on what are often considered the hard doctrines of modern liberalism and try to pinpoint what are some of the crucial ideas that lie at its foundation.

Anglo-American liberalism took its lead from the Greeks and was formulated by several authors, but primarily it could be said that it was the ideas of authors such as Milton, Locke, and Mill and those of similar beliefs that established its doctrines. On the purely American side, there was also of course the hard documents of the constitution and the beautiful words of people like Jefferson who saw the ideal of a liberal society in "truths that are self-evident," which would protect "life, liberty, and

the pursuit of happiness.” To return to Polanyi’s ideas, he argues that looking at the various doctrines of liberty and the history behind them, there are two ways liberty was formulated in the modern era, “anti-authoritarianism and philosophic doubt.”¹¹ Utilitarianism is of course also present, but we will deal with that later, as it was more of an apologetic stance to support liberty rather than one that started it.

If we look for confirmation of Polanyi’s thesis in the authors above, they are easy to find. Milton for instance, argued in his *Areopagitica* that freedom from authority must exist because authority gets in the way of truth’s natural discourse. He passionately stated, “Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?”¹² This was an appeal against authority of the English government trying to enact a law of censorship, which Milton rightly feared might usurp the liberty of free thought and speech, thus destroying the natural path of truth’s dialogue. Further supplementing this anti-authoritarian stance was the reaction to the church’s long reign of suppression. As we mentioned earlier, the well known movement of anti-clericalism strongly reflected this anti-authoritarian attitude in its fight against the church. W.E.G. Lecky wrote in his *History of Rationalism in Europe* (1983) describing this sentiment with the words, “All over Europe the priesthood are now associated with a policy of toryism, of reaction or obstruction.”

The second half of the doctrine of liberty we are already familiar with from the Greek history of liberalism and the philosophy of doubt. In more modern times this

¹¹ Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, pp. 95.

¹² John Milton *Areopagitica: And, of Education* (London, Crofts Classics, 1988) pp. 47.

philosophy, however, was used to make a new kind of argument. Society being shaped by centuries of religious strife, most recently the wars between Protestantism and Catholicism, sought to use doubt to put an end to any one religion's claims to sole possession in matters of truth. Here the philosophy of doubt was not applied to disestablish religion and traditional beliefs, so much as it was to prevent their mutual self-destruction. Seeking to establish a society where all religions (more so in the sense of Christian denominations) could co-exist and yet do so peacefully, Locke argued continually for philosophic doubt, *because the truth in matters of religion can never be so as to warrant outside force*. Just like with Socrates, the suspension of judgment and the stance of 'I do not know' were used to help found the need for a liberal society. Because of this stance, governments should admit the various religions and not enforce one over the other (though Locke's stance on irreligion is another debate). Unfortunately, however, this brave new philosophy had not realized the precarious ground upon which it stood.

Before we get to that though, it is here we should begin to make an important distinction. We know with the hindsight of history that these formulations of liberty have more or less consistently sustained liberalism in the Anglo-American world to this day, but in large parts of Continental Europe, eventually during the twentieth century they self-destructed into totalitarian rule. The question to ask then is where lies the difference between the two?

Perhaps the most obvious difference between these two areas is that while in the

Anglo-American world this new doctrine of liberty was used to end internal wars of the church due to the schism of Protestantism, “Enlightenment” on the Continental side was less concerned with this struggle and was based more on the French Enlightenment struggle against monarchy, coupled with a strong anti-religious movement. A new movement of materialism supercharged by the reinvigoration of Greek doubts and the resentment of years of political and ecclesiastical dogmatic rule began to form. Baron d’Holbach, one of the key figures of this movement, symbolized this growing view. Polanyi paraphrases d’Holdbach’s attitude when describing this time period as one where people believed man is simply unhappy because, “his mind is so infected with prejudices that one might think him forever to condemn to err.”¹³

Error was becoming the primary reason that man, both ignorant and miserable, needed a liberal state free from its years of domination by authority, and as an extension of this a secular state. This conception strikes clearly of the growing influence of science, which had begun to rise ever since Francis Bacon majestically outlined its “true” quest for truth, as being obstructed primarily by what he called the false “idols” of man. According to Bacon, who spoke not without justification, the new era dictated it was, “necessary that a more perfect use and application of the mind be introduced.”¹⁴ A new scientific outlook of doubt combined with an increased emphasis on reason (*which I will refer to in a general way for convenience from here on out as **scientific skepticism***) saw man’s traditional beliefs merely as prejudices. In

¹³ Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, pp. 95.

¹⁴ Francis Bacon, *Selected Philosophical Works: The Great Instauration* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), p. 73.

d'Holbach's own words, invoking a conception similar to Bacon is the idea that:

To error must be attributed those inveterate hatreds, those barbarous persecutions, those numerous massacres, those dreadful tragedies, of which under the pretext of serving the interests of Heaven, the earth has but too frequently been made the theatre.¹⁵

It is not hard to see how such an attitude might have developed simply by looking in any high school history book about this time period. It was an outlook that had years of schooling behind it in the form of religious atrocity, from the crusades to the inquisition. Religion was thus becoming viewed as a false subjective delusion used only for power, while simultaneously causing both man's misery and obstructing his search for truth. In opposition to this, Greek doubts combined with the advent of science were seen as the ultimate tool to create a new liberal state, which would have the power to search out truth free from error and obstruction. Unfortunately, however, this new liberalism was in the end based on skepticism and doubt and a doctrine of liberty based on doubt, as we shall see, does not recognize itself as inconsistent, with a logical conclusion necessitating the destruction of the very ideals that create it.

Internal Contradictions in the Doctrine of Liberty

The story and structure of the doctrine of liberty as handed down to us is now quite clear as being founded in the twofold forces of antiauthoritarianism and philosophic doubt. In addition, we have also recognized preemptively a fundamental difference that was employed in the use of this doctrine between Anglo-America and Continental Europe. The distinction was primarily in the highly religious use of this

¹⁵ Baron d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, trans. H.D. Robinson (Boston: J.P. Mendum, 1853), pp. 152, ix-x.

doctrine in the former, while the highly skeptical use of it in the latter. This distinction can be stated plainly for what it is here, a preservation of a place for *traditional beliefs* and thus the moral sphere these entail in Anglo-America, while an as of yet unknown place for the moral sphere in Europe. In addition to this we might also add something briefly mentioned before, which was the establishment of concrete democratic institutions in Anglo-America, such as the Constitution and Bill of Rights in the United States. These things combined to create a distinctive difference from Europe, allowing a situation which Polanyi describes as, “a skepticism on a short leash for the sake of preserving religious beliefs.”¹⁶ However, as we shall argue at the end of this section, this so-called ‘leash’ is hardly enough to combat skepticism, nor are the more philosophical justifications that utilitarianism tries to justify it with (part of the reason so many philosophers were able to criticize it, such as Nietzsche and Marx). Ultimately, it is the persistence of this unstable formulation of freedom that underlies many of the tensions between liberty and authority to this day.

On the Continental side of things it is very easy to examine history to see what happened with our new clarified conception of the foundations of liberty. We have said that liberty has been founded, in part and once again, on philosophical doubt as it was in the Greek era. In Locke’s language, this says that because of doubt we must allow all religions because in the end, none of these can truly be demonstrated as certain in the eyes of doubt. *Let us apply this doctrine to the moral and ethical sphere.*

¹⁶ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 11.

In Polanyi's words, "It follows that, unless ethical principles can be demonstrated with certainty, we should refrain from imposing them and tolerate their denial."¹⁷

Ethical and moral principles, however, cannot be *demonstrated* in the strictest sense like a scientific experiment for as Polanyi notes, "you cannot prove the obligation to tell the truth, to uphold justice and mercy."¹⁸ Such a way of thinking, if followed to its end, would lead to a meltdown of society and lawlessness in the land.

The Anglo-American Excuse

Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness – John Stuart Mill – On Utilitarianism

One reaction to this was the Utilitarian response, but if we are going to take it as the savior of the moral sphere, some serious flaws in its thinking must be recognized. In his book *On the Liberty and Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill rightfully complains about deficiencies in other philosophical theories describing morality. He describes one of these as, "the popular theory of a natural faculty, a sense or instinct, informing us of right and wrong."¹⁹ The obvious flaw in this, however, is that any such intuitive instincts often fail to do anything in particular cases, rendering them nebulous to the point of being useless. Another school of thought he complains of include those who say, "morality must be deduced from principles; and the intuitive school affirms as strongly as the inductive, that there is a science of morals."²⁰ This deductive approach

¹⁷ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 9.

¹⁸ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 9.

¹⁹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Utilitarianism*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), pp. 138.

²⁰ Mill, 139.

is largely an offshoot of Kantian thinking and again here, as with the instinctive school, we see morals being founded primarily in the *a priori*. Kant believed universal reason can create maxims and under the guide of his *categorical imperative*: ‘So act, that the rule on which thou actest would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings,’ a science of morality can be created. Regardless, Mill is highly skeptical of such formulations, saying of Kant:

He fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the consequences of the universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur.²¹

In order to amend these deficiencies Mill goes on to expound the Utilitarian formulation. Mill describes this saying, “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”²² This is an interesting idea and it seems that Mill and like minded people believe that in the end, like a math problem, being a good person shows through as the best way to be happy. Indeed this has echoes of Locke’s argument on the pleasure-pain principle and can even be connected back to Greek ideas of “the good.” It is an idea that is still preached to this day.

But it seems to me that somehow this is a reverse formulation for goodness and morality. Goodness and morality are concepts that are meant to describe a person’s attitude toward others, not because in the end it will make oneself happy, but because

²¹ Mill, 140-141.

²² Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, 144.

such things in the end are right and right in and of themselves. If morality becomes only an extension of what is ultimately good for *me*, it's hard to see how in situations where being moral has almost no utility (for instance when a man sacrifices his life for another; the definition of a truly selfless and moral act) we would have any inclination to follow them. Polanyi makes an excellent passing comment along this line of thinking in his book the *Logic of Liberty*:

Utilitarian calculus cannot in fact demonstrate our obligations to ideals which demand serious sacrifices from us. A man's sincerity in professing his ideals is to be measured rather by the *lack* of prudence which he shows in perusing them. The utilitarian confirmation of unselfishness is no more than a pretence, by which traditional ideals are made acceptable to a philosophically skeptical age. Camouflaged as long term selfishness, the traditional ideals of man are protected from destruction by skepticism.²³

By this realization alone, it seems clear that Utilitarianism is far more of an excuse for morality than a foundation for it. If in the twentieth century we are still leaning on such a crutch to explain to the skeptics why we are in fact motivated to be good people in the traditional sense, we are doing it in a way that is naïve to the point of being dishonest. This fact alone should demand that we need to reexamine the nature of morality and its place in a liberal society.

The Downfall of Liberty in Europe

The basic theory of what happened is summarized in two parts by both Paul Johnson and Michael Polanyi. In the words of Johnson, "At the beginning of the 1920s the belief began to circulate, for the first time on a popular level, that there were no longer any absolutes,"²⁴ to this we can add Polanyi's conception and see the natural consequence, "Universal standards of human behavior, having fallen into

²³ Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, 98.

²⁴ Johnson, 10.

philosophic disrepute, various substitutes were put forward in their place.”²⁵

The story after this point is perhaps one of the most interesting in the history of philosophy and politics. The moral sphere having thus been emptied of all its traditional backbone became a lifeless vacuum, and like any vacuum, it demanded to be filled. There were plenty of philosophies ready to move in and fill its space in order to provide the moral foundation necessary to a stable society. Of course now the only criterion, or better said the limiting criterion, was that any replacement philosophy must pass the litmus test of an age founded on scientific skepticism. The past three centuries since Modern Enlightenment began had produced some of the most ingenious and convincing philosophers in the history of the world. Three hundred years of free intellectual and critical thought gave birth to entire systems of philosophy that would easily fit the now seemingly minor hole left behind in the discrediting of traditionally held beliefs; philosophies that had no qualms with forgetting the fact that without the liberalism that had engendered them, they never would have emerged in the thoughts of men in the first place. Bigger things were now at stake than the free progression of human ideas, or so it was thought. Morality deprived of its traditional base sought a new home clothed in skeptical philosophy that either resulted in a reduction of truth to complete relativism, or the reduction of man by “objective” scientific method to his so-called baser and more instinctual drives. New philosophies seemingly had *all* the answers, or worse they said no one set

²⁵ Polanyi, *Meaning* 12.

of answers could be entirely better than another. If we apply our previous language from Polanyi to this interpretation, you could speculate that antiauthoritarianism drew the greater portion of the relative crowd, while those who emphasized philosophic doubt were drawn more to what would become an arrogant “objective” materialism. But such a distinction is far too vague to argue in depth.

What we do know is that these two poles quickly found philosophers of genius already prepared for them like ‘mines in the daylight,’ as Polanyi says in the passage quoted at the beginning of this discussion. We could go on further to elaborate how certain philosophies took over in which certain ways. We could for instance postulate that it was the supreme individualism of philosophers such as Rousseau and Nietzsche that was the primary force eventually evolving past mere personal individualism, and into the nationalism of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (Polanyi suggests this). Or we could even blame Einstein as a contributor, when misinterpretation of his theory of relativity as somehow supporting relativism, only added fuel to a growing fire of fanaticism (something Johnson alludes to). Not to mention the influence of thinkers such as Hegel or Darwin on this development. As to the later advent of Marxist socialism and its so-called scientific description of the world, reducing man to mere base forces, we always have Marx and his material dialectic to blame, or we could even blame Freud for convincing a large part of the world that, as Marx said, man at the core is driven by something far more instinctual, sexual, and even violent than the morals he hides behind admit. For these people morality was something to be realized

in man (via the state), not something to be discovered or unleashed in the individual.

The specific way in which totalitarian regimes took over is not for discussion here, rather we need simply to realize that an age of liberalism founded on doubt had provided both the inspiration and the tools these two poles of totalitarianism needed to take over. One of the few things we can say for certain was that because of this, traditional values were replaced by scientifically skeptical state values and as Johnson put it;

The nineteenth century saw the climax of the philosophy of personal responsibility - the notion that each of us is individually accountable for our actions- which is the joint heritage of Judeo-Christianity and the classical world.²⁶

The result of this historical narrative and why it has come full circle from un-liberty to liberty and back to un-liberty is quite clear. In one of Polanyi's more definitive statements from his work *Meaning*, he describes our situation quite effectively.

Science destroys itself, free thought destroys itself, because scientific skepticism would trust only material necessity for achieving universal brotherhood. Skepticism and utopianism thus fuse into a new skeptical fanaticism.²⁷

The greatest tragedy of this, however, is best described by Johnson as we see the tremendous power such a skeptical fanaticism gains when put into the machinery of the state. All of these new systems, having effectively claimed that they were irrefutable under scientific skepticism and that they were establishing a truth and a moral sphere, which had no *real* existence in itself, or in previous history, thus took on a new and terrifying sense of righteousness. Add this to the fact that they now had the ability to leave the individual sphere of thought and be injected into the apparatus

²⁶ Johnson, 10.

²⁷ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 4.

of the state, and you have the formula for the atrocities of the twentieth century. Paul

Johnson described in *Modern Times* the exponential power of this new attitude:

It is common place that men are excessively ruthless and cruel not as a rule out of avowed malice but from outraged righteousness. How much more is this true of legally constituted states, invested with all the seeming moral authority of parliaments and congresses and courts of justice! The destructive capacity of the individual, however vicious, is small; of the state, however well-intentioned, almost limitless. Expand the state and that destructive capacity necessarily expands too, *pari passu*.²⁸

In my opinion, it should be enough to know that any philosophy that tries to “create” the moral sphere (an already dubious prospect from the start) and does so from the base of scientific skepticism, can never do so and not turn into a totalitarian nightmare. Some might object straightaway, it is unfair to categorically label certain political ideologies with the word nightmare; after all it is conceivable that people desire, if not need, concrete authority and ideology and the pretensions of security and a structured moral world these provide. Whether that is possible is a speculation about human nature I’m not ready to go into, but I will say that one thing about human nature we already know from how these philosophies got started contradicts this position. These philosophies were made possible because the freedom of a liberal society did not repress them, or attempt to direct the process of their creation. Even if we grant the apology often given by very liberal communists, namely, that such authority driven governments can avoid *repressive* tendencies and create the dualistic ideal of a liberal authoritarian society (a sort of authoritarianism that avoids domination over individual freedoms of thought seen in outright totalitarianism), it

²⁸ Johnson, 14.

will by definition never resist its authority in *directing* how and where we place society's primary resources in seeking out truth concerning matters that *it* considers best for mankind; while in the liberal society truth seeks what truth considers best for itself. The latter is by definition the essence of discovery.

This idea of directing our search is exactly what the church was doing in its direction of man's thought toward theology. It did produce a large amount of good material and yet that era today is still known as the Dark Ages. It is also exactly what Soviet Russia tried to do when it took scientists investigating what might be called the more "pure sciences" (science for science's sake), and forced them to try and figure out specific problems the state thought important for its, "Five Year Plan." Communist China also tried to do a similar thing when it told all of its citizens to begin collecting metals and learn metallurgy for the "Great Leap Forward" movement, because such materials and knowledge were the things most *needed* for society to progress. What these latter two efforts amounted to were some of the most colossal failures and wastes of time in the history of organized government. True discovery, it seems, is in great part a function of freedom. Yet that is a debate for the final part of this overall essay.

Regardless of this debate, it must be realized that scientific skepticism will never found the liberal states that give rise to it, so any society, even one such as our own that wishes to establish the doctrines of liberty based on this, must beware of its internal contradictions. No matter what the solutions are that arise to fill this moral

vacuum (and many do arise), skepticism will never believe that such a thing as morality really exists as an independent force that men can appeal to, nor will it trust individual responsibility enough to allow a truly liberal society to seek after this ideal. It speaks an entirely different vocabulary, for it views everything in the world as either a chain of reducible and traceable causes, or worse as relativistic nonsense. The result of these conclusions is always the so called *progressive* outlook, where under the guise of infallibility, scientific skepticism seeks utopianism; an ideal in the eyes of progressivism that only needs the world to “unite!” as Marx put it, and achieve its revolutionary visions even if this means extreme violence.

This is the crux of the second part of our essay: *disestablishing the reducibility of the intellectual and moral spheres of man and, secondly, reestablishing a legitimate claim that personal responsibility can be trusted.* Such a possibility can only be speculated by reexamining the basic ways in which we come into contact with such ideas in the first place. In other words, how we know what we know and justify it, i.e., the realm of epistemology. Scientific skepticism will always look for what Polanyi complains of as, “more basic needs or wants, i.e., more material, more biological, more instinctive, more comforting,”²⁹ to try and explain away something like morality and personal responsibility, the two things without which we cannot justify the liberal state. These are things scientific skepticism doesn’t realize are entirely outside of its field of justified inquiry and understanding, evidently so, if for no other

²⁹ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 3.

reason than the simple fact that science owes a great deal of its own creation to the inquiry these things engender and sustain, not the other way around. The absurdities in its so-called objective stance when it begins to examine living conscious things are huge. It would describe the animate and conscious spheres in terms of the physics of billiards if it could, and it attempts to do so, completely disregarding the role of the *knower* in relation to the object known. Not to mention its refusal to realize that it too is a system built on beliefs and presuppositions and lays no more claim to complete objectivity than religion itself!

But before such provocative claims against scientific skepticism can be made, we need a new conception for the nature of what it means to be human that even the skeptic will have to admit as possible. It is here that we shift from how the doctrine of liberty in the past was formulated, to how it *might* be argued more consistently for the future. I do not think that Polanyi's theories of epistemology are as iron proof as the historical analysis we have attempted to prove here. That being said, I still believe they offer some incredible insights into the realm of how we know things. And if we grant some key parts that the next section will try to isolate, then a new formulation of liberty for the individual over authority from the state will be shown as a natural consequence. So now, with a good deal of irony, let's take a look at renowned and accomplished *scientist* Michael Polanyi's vision of the world.

PART II

The mode of production of the material means of life determines, in general, the social, political and intellectual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness. – Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Preface)

The Marxist doctrine of social determinism and the kindred teachings of Fascism, claiming that thought is the product of society and ought therefore to serve the State, remove all ground on which to consolidate an authority to which man could justifiably appeal against the command of the State. If on the other hand it is admitted that the realm of thought possesses its own life, then freedom is not only made possible, but its institution becomes a social necessity. Freedom is made possible by this doctrine because it implies that truth, justice, and humaneness will stand above society, and hence the institutions which exist to cultivate these ideals, such as the Press, the law, the religions, will be safely established and available to receive complaints of all men against the State and, if need be, to oppose it. Freedom also becomes necessary because the State cannot maintain and augment the sphere of thought, which can live only in the pursuit of its own internal necessities, unless it refrains from all attempts to dominate it and further undertakes to protect all men and women who would devote themselves to the service of thought from interference by their fellow-citizens, private or official-whether prompted by prejudice or guided by enlightened plans. Michael Polanyi, The Contempt of Freedom.

The dichotomy outlined by comparing the two perspectives above is clearly apparent. In one conception the consciousness of man and the realm of thought are conceived *entirely* as the creation of a more base and powerful things, which for Marx is society and class instinct. Polanyi, on the other hand, believes consciousness has a ‘life of its own,’ and as such, is an instigator of thought and not just the product of other elemental forces. These two conceptions have drastic different visions of the nature of man and by the character of the elements they identify as primary, vastly change how we structure society when we move out of the theoretical and into

practice. Praxis, as it sometimes called, is being given two different forms of emphasis when considering this dichotomy. In the first, the practices and materials that we use and possess in the world have the greatest influence over how we then inevitably create society; while in the other, the power of the mind is primary as it works to create the practices which inform society.

From the outset, it might seem this is a comparison of the dialectics of Hegel and Marx; Hegel saw universal reason as the driving force behind history and Marx, by his own admission, flipped the model around. This is not, however, the discussion we are about to undertake. The question at hand is not about establishing one force as the creator of the other, but simply about reestablishing the concrete and independent place of one, which the other considers merely its offshoot. That is to say, reestablishing consciousness, the mind and the products this mind creates, as independent entities in themselves. I believe Polanyi would agree with this conception of the aim behind most of his theories and, regardless, even if he would go further to say it is an overriding prime instigator (which I don't think he would), it's not necessary for my purpose here: strengthening the doctrines of liberty.

Establishing the independent realm of thought and the moral sphere is the necessary step, if we want to refute the skeptical formulations of society and reestablish a doctrine for liberty. *Liberalism* (and the reign of a free intellect and mind which this word implies) needs to be established on an entirely consistent doctrine to prevent its own self-destruction under the extreme skepticism of its own creation. To

do so, the intellectual and moral sphere must be shown as neither reducible, nor refutable, by skeptical claims that they have a mere secondary existence, or even worse, as merely being a mask obscuring the face of more powerful forces. The only way we can do this is if we can show that man possesses these **independent** ruling faculties, and that they are beyond the skeptic's ability to define into a categorical list of sequential causes and concrete definitions, which supposedly more controlling factors wield.

From this we have reached a roundabout way of coming to why Michael Polanyi turned to philosophy. As a scientist during the cold war era watching the Soviet Union demote the role of science to a mere function in the service of "greater" needs and utilities, he saw his passion for discovering truth entirely overturned. The scientist's passion for truth was considered either disingenuous, or as merely a stuck up game played by snobby intellectuals neglecting the real problems of the world and the masses "starving" outside. As it was with Nietzsche, the so called "will to truth" was no longer considered as a *tangible* thing by a skeptical age. He complains of this new attitude in his very first work, *The Contempt of Freedom*, first written as notes between 1935 and 1940. In this record, Polanyi expresses his sincere belief that as a scientist he is motivated simply by the joy of figuring things out. He says, "Surely scientists cannot assume that they form a race apart governed throughout by motives which are quite absent in other human beings! And yet this is precisely what the

scornful rejection of the ideal of pure science by Marxists amounts to.”³⁰

Polanyi’s reaction to this predicament was to argue that such reductionism denies the very role of the scientist, as a person and active *knower*, in the act of science. It values the particulars of thoughts, or the certain particular motivations of thoughts, as having more reality and *tangibility* than the products of thought, or the act of thought itself. As he says in the title to his most famous work, *Personal Knowledge*, he wants to reconnect the “gap between fact and value, science and humanity.” If the world is really the sum of a material dialectic as Marx proposes, or even worse, the mechanistic determinacy that science was beginning to argue in his time, then it seems the role of the individual, of thought, and of consciousness itself, have somehow been demoted to a mere product of an inevitable equation derived from baser, more illuminating instincts. As a natural extension of this he realized the giant problem which the historical analysis presented in Part One made plainly clear, namely, that such a belief causes the self-destruction of liberty. We now see the reason for this is deeply rooted in the disestablishment of any view where the mind is seen as an independent force, for as Polanyi observes, “If thought and inquiry are nothing in themselves it is pointless to set them free.”³¹

Polanyi recognized that by separating science from the crucial act (and entirely personal **skill**) of *knowing*, science was in effect not only blindly disregarding the one facet that makes all these amazing inquiries possible (ourselves), but in doing so it

³⁰ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 15.

³¹ Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, 101.

was rendering everything meaningless. For without the intimate and passionate participation of the scientist (and for our purposes any serious thinker be he a poet, musician, or political theorist), such things neither would have been discovered, nor would they be assigned the *meanings* that make them worthwhile. To the new scientifically skeptical age, such things as *meaning*, *value*, and *consciousness* had no tangible existence, unless they were created and enforced. Worse still was the fact that in science they had no *desired* place, as this new system of thought saw them only as getting in the way of, what it saw, as a more objective truth. The individual and his values were seen quite single mindedly as a mere subjective and haze inducing obstacle in the way of objective truth. This *scientism*, as one might call it, ignored the fact that it is due to individuals and their active, creative, and passionate faculty of knowing alone that science itself is known and empowered to conduct its inquiry in the first place.

From here we can dive into a few of Polanyi's specific theories about the role of the knower in relation to the object he knows and the active use of *skill* this entails. We don't need a massive explication to do this, but simply a precise look at a few general structures that he develops in nearly all of his books. This is the realm of what Polanyi calls the act of *Tacit 'from-to' Knowing*, and the personal participation of the knower through what he calls *indwelling* in every act of this knowing. He proposes a hierarchal model of consciousness. Such terms will be used to describe his theories from here on. The end goal of this is to use Polanyi's ideas to re-strengthen the

doctrine of liberty. To do this we must keep in mind two objectives, namely, to disestablish the claim that the moral and intellectual spheres of man are reducible to such *explicit* and *predictable* formulas, as scientific skepticism and material dialectics claim and, secondly, to show why it is that skepticism's own claim to irrefutability is entirely illogical.

In the process of doing this we will by extension re-conceptualize the doctrine of liberty from doubt to a new form of "belief"³² (not in the traditional sense), that proves its own validity because under our theory of knowledge it is by liberty's existence, by the power of belief, and by inquiry alone that we come to know and discover anything about the world in the first place.

The Tacit Dimension

- "The existence of something called consciousness is a venerable hypothesis: not a datum, not directly observable..."
- "... although we cannot get along without the concept of consciousness, actually there is no such thing."
- "The knower as an entity is an unnecessary postulate" – comments from neurologists and psychologists Hebb, Kubie, and Lashley, respectively, at a symposium on brain mechanisms.

These quotations illustrate how science often conceptualizes consciousness. They show quite clearly how scientific skepticism is unable to truly conceptualize the existence of such a thing, which I think most of us would personally acknowledge as

³² It is important to note here that Polanyi's conceptions shift on this issue from his most famous work *Personal Knowledge*, to some of his later texts *The Tacit Dimension*, *Knowing and Being*, and his last work *Meaning*. Since his theories evolved over the years, along with them his terminologies, we will have to take an integrative approach to try and find his overall core ideas and show how they shed light on the problems thus developed from the historical narrative. An example of this shift is in his discussions of the role of belief. First, what Polanyi means with this is more akin to the idea of "commitment" than simply belief. He makes the distinction that we only truly believe something if we are committed to what such a belief entails and will by extension act upon it. In *Personal Knowledge* this idea is highly emphasized, while in *The Tacit Dimension* eight years later he provides a more logical structure to the driving force behind our commitments than just belief. He notes this in the preface to *The Tacit Dimension* saying, "Viewing the content of these pages from the position reached in *Personal Knowledge* and *The Study of Man* eight years ago, I see that my reliance on the necessity of commitment has been reduced by working out the structure of tacit knowing." We will discuss this theory of *tacit knowing* in depth, being a key point to resolving the dilemmas proposed in Part 1.

existing. Scientific skepticism can only see such a thing as the *abstract* description of more basic and (what it sees as) more real mechanical processes and not a tangible thing that is active and real in itself. Polanyi makes a very simple and very strong argument that such a stance is ridiculous. Consciousness is not merely the sum of its parts and processes.

The following is a basic example of how we possess knowledge and go about performing certain activities from the hammering of a nail to the solving of a physics problem. It will serve as a brief sketch and a *metaphor* so that we can then develop further into Polanyi's over all theory of knowledge. The basic principle Polanyi starts from in *The Tacit Dimension* is the fact, "*we can know more than we can tell.*"³³ This is a pretty self-evident statement; seen by if nothing other than realizing the difficulty in articulating certain things that we more or less already comprehend, say for instance, the writing of an essay. A much more basic example of this ability, however, is in the capacity to recognize instantly a person's face in a crowd. At a simple glance one can process such knowledge, but one usually cannot say exactly how they put it all together into a recognition.

We don't, for instance, examine the particulars of eye size, nose length, and chin shape and then deduce from these particulars suddenly that ah, it is so and so. Our recognition exists at a sub-articulate level. We can, admittedly, strain to extract an articulation of this process, as the police sketch artist does while trying to draw a

³³ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, (New York: Doubleday & Company INC., 1966), p. 4.

likeness, but this post dissection of the mental process says nothing about how we recognize the physiognomy of another person in real life, and more importantly, will almost always be incomplete. Another example of this form of *tacit* knowledge can be found in the simple movement of a muscle when wielding a tool; we simply do it, we don't explain it into motion.

One last example comes from various psychological experiments. For instance, there is one where subjects are shown a series of random syllables continually flashing on a screen in front them, with one set of 'shock syllables' randomly inserted in at various times. When the shock syllables appear the subject receives a shock. It was found in this process that even though the subject never identified the shock syllables, or even made the real connection that certain syllables were associated with the shock, over time when the chosen syllables appeared, subjects would tacitly become aware of them and their heart rates would rise in anticipation. These very basic observations show the ability of the mind to gather a variety of *tacitly* known *particulars* and induce toward a summation, even though an explicit articulation of this process is hard to make, perhaps even impossible. It is a process very similar to how our minds create a shape that is not there out of empty space in Gestalt psychology.³⁴

³⁴ However, it is very important to make a distinction here that Polanyi rejects Gestalt psychology. Gestalt psychology suggests that perception of a physiognomy takes place through, "the spontaneous equilibration of its particulars impressed on the retina or on the brain"(see Encyclopedia Britannica). Polanyi thinks rather that it is our going out into the world and *trying* to figure out what it means which creates this ability. He characterizes our ability to recognize physiognomies as, "the outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge" (*The Tacit Dimension*. 72). The major difference here is that viewed this way, we see that not only do our abilities to recognize a shape in a shadow become tacitly held in this process, but so do higher functions, such as skills and even language itself. This last fact I have noticed personally and think would agree with what Polanyi

From these simple examples we can outline what Polanyi sees as the basic structure of tacit knowing. First that, “It always involves two things, or two kinds of things,” and second that, “we know the first term only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second.”³⁵ In the examples of above for instance, we know the particulars of a face (its features) only by *attending* those particulars to the overall vision of the face, not without it. Without the overall vision the particulars have no meaning; no reference to make an identification of what they are. Without this relationship we cannot know either of the two, and by definition there wouldn’t be anything to be known in the first place, except random unrelated particulars that thus have no *meaning* in the real sense of the word.

This is what Polanyi calls the *functional* structure of tacit knowing, which is a “from-to” model of human consciousness. In *The Tacit Dimension* he refers to these two forms of knowledge as the *proximal* and the *distal*, but his language in *Personal Knowledge* seems to describe this process better; they are known as the *subsidiary* and *focal* forms of awareness. The former is our collection of the particulars in any given act of knowing (and usually only known in *entirety* in tacit form) and the latter is what and how we actively combine these particulars to *mean* something in focal awareness.

is getting at. I have confirmed my observation by asking other people if they often have the same experience. After learning a foreign language to a certain degree many times one will hear in the background noise very clearly certain words or even entire phrases said in that foreign language, despite there being no one who speaks it nearby. The brain has thus formulated from the ambient sounds words that weren’t there, just as in Gestalt psychology the eyes complete a shape that is not there, only here this integration was a product of, “active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge.”

³⁵ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 10.

We can extend this realization to perhaps all acts of skill both physically, and as we shall see later, mentally. One clear example of this is the process going on right now as I type these words. As my fingers begin the process of typing I am engaging the faculty of several muscular moves. And yet the only way I truly know, or even come to be able *to* know these actions, is in relation in the actual act of using them to form an *appearance*, which is the sentence I am writing here. My attention is focused *focally* on the construction of a sentence and I am using knowledge of the various particular muscle moves, grammatical structures, and vocabulary involved, only in a tacit *subsidiary* form. In other words, the particulars of my finger's movements gain significance and status as a *comprehensive entity* in themselves, only in relation to the pattern they create, which are my sentences. The same is also true of the pianist, who playing a piece of music, gives meaning to this act only in the *playing* of it. His performance is not in the sum of the particular notes. The notes on the page are not music, but rather music is the active use of these things and how they are used.

Polanyi extends this analysis of physical movements (such as fingers) to the use of all tools and not just ones directly connected to the body. A good example of this would be the blind man's use of his cane in "seeing" a pathway. Feelings impressed at the end of the cane are transposed to the hands, where the various particulars of feeling are integrated into the body and then into certain meanings. Thus, the blind man doesn't interpret all of this as simply different impressions on the hand, but he *feels* the effect on the end of the cane, as if it were his own hand. The same is true of

the scientist using a probe and the result in Polanyi's philosophy is that, "we may regard this as the transformation of the tool or probe into a sentient extension of our body."³⁶

All of these examples serve to show that the act of knowing is all part of a skill in what Polanyi calls *indwelling*. Let us extend our model to the mental sphere. A scientist who is trying to solve a problem, or even a moralist for that matter, will be tacitly relying on all the particulars and theories he has thus come into contact with by utilizing his subsidiary awareness of them. In the solving of a problem, the scientist dwells in these particulars as he is trying to come up with a vision of what *comprehensive entity* they might form. The same is true of the blind man using his can to try and decipher his own elusive *comprehensive entities*, such as the boundaries and direction of a sidewalk as he makes his way.

From these examples we can see that after we first gather particulars we then hold them tacitly, as we search for what 'entity' they might jointly mean. This is effectively to say that what we are doing in the employment of a tool, be it physical or mental (such as theories or ideas) is to, "incorporate it in our body- or extend our body to include it – so that we come to dwell in it."³⁷ This "it" is the collection of all particulars we tacitly know even without focusing on them.

This might seem a sort of senseless metaphor-making, but it is no metaphor the moment we realize that, "it is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that

³⁶ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 16.

³⁷ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 16.

we understand their joint meaning.”³⁸ This realization of our indwelling in the act of knowing brings us to a very important **structural facet** that seems to exist in all tacit knowing:

(1) Tacit knowing of a coherent entity relies on our awareness of the particulars of the entity for attending to it; and (2) if we switch our attention to the particulars, this function of the particulars is canceled and we lose sight of the entity to which we had attended.”³⁹

As we will show later, this is not just due to a weakness of our mind’s ability to multi-task, but is also due to the fact that these two directions of focus are governed by different laws, so it would seem in considering one the mind is forced to cease considering the other, but that argument will have to wait.⁴⁰

Basic examples that show this facet about human knowing are quite easy to find. For instance, Polanyi notes of the pianist that, “concentrating attention on his fingers, a pianist can temporarily paralyze his movement.”⁴¹ Even now I can confirm the fact of this statement in that the moment I turn my awareness focally away from constructing the overall pattern of my sentences and ideas, and on to what finger movements are required in this act, in doing so I can no longer type.

Irreducibility

The immediate response to this might simply be that all of this just recognizes a weakness in the human mind’s ability to multi-task, but even if this is so in part of the case, there is a lot more implied here from what we’ve already said. The skeptic will quickly claim that just because we focus our attention on the particulars, it doesn’t

³⁸ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* 18.

³⁹ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 34

⁴⁰ See section on ‘Structure behind Hierarchy’, page 45.

⁴¹ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 22.

signify that meaning is destroyed. The argument goes that the function of focusing on the particulars of any given process, such as the musical notes on the page when playing a piano for instance, serves a vital role that does not destroy the process of knowing thus outlined, but enhances it. By turning our focus on the particulars we are simply gaining a clearer knowledge of the component parts in the process and thus gaining the fundamental knowledge of the process itself. After gaining this clarification and upon *reintegrating* the clarified particulars to the overall process, this deconstructive analysis has actually strengthened and defined meaning not subtracted from it. In other words, just because originally we only held all of these particulars tacitly, doesn't mean that in reality they hadn't always added up to the complete definition and meaning of the whole.

Polanyi recognizes the high value of this suggestion, noting the obvious fact that one can learn to use a machine and, "learn to use it skillfully, without knowing how it works. But the engineer's understanding of its construction and operation goes much deeper."⁴² And yet conversely, Polanyi's core argument shows the falsity of such a view. This "expert" knowledge, however illuminating, **does not** champion a deconstructionist skeptical view. Polanyi makes the crucial point in the following passage:

An explicit integration cannot replace its tacit counterpart. The skill of a driver cannot be replaced by a thorough schooling in the theory of the motorcar; the knowledge I have of my own body differs altogether from the knowledge of its physiology, and the rules of rhyming and prosody do not tell what a poem told me, without any knowledge of its rules.⁴³

⁴² Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 19.

⁴³ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 20.

The point is not to say that deconstructive analysis cannot be extremely instructive and helpful, it's just to say that such analysis is completely false in thinking it defines the process and the active pattern formation of a comprehensive entity. Such a stance entirely ignores the utterly essential, personal, and tacit *skill* of whatever it is that serves as the integrator (i.e. the person or 'organizing principle,' as we will see in the next section). Our examples above show the existence of this component and that a deconstructive analysis of its underlying particulars, does not add up into the comprehensive entity which is produced by focal awareness. Focal awareness, turned back on its own tacit foundations, cannot arrive at the sum of its whole. All of this as technical as it sounds, is in fact a quite simple observation and yet has drastic implications:

. We are approaching here a crucial question. The declared aim of modern science is to establish a strictly detached, objective knowledge. Any falling short of this idea is accepted only as a temporary imperfection, which we must aim at eliminating. But suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge. The ideal of exact science would turn out to be fundamentally misleading and possibly a source of devastating fallacies... formalizing all knowledge to the exclusion of tacit knowing is self-defeating.⁴⁴

If a person gains knowledge only by tacitly indwelling in its particulars and upon doing this seeks to integrate these particulars in the act of knowing a comprehensive entity, it is wrong to say that this entity is the sum of its particulars. The reason is very simply that to do so is to pretend there is not an organizing principle, i.e. no knower swaying influence over the process. Polanyi provides the following examples warning of the dangers in a deconstructionist theory that attempts define things otherwise:

⁴⁴ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 20.

The damage done by the specification of particulars may be irredeemable, meticulous detailing may obscure beyond recall a subject like history, literature, or philosophy. Speaking more generally. The belief that, since particulars are more tangible, their knowledge offers a true conception of thing is fundamentally mistaken.⁴⁵

Implications of Tacit Knowing

If we are to refute the skeptics' claims that consciousness and man are ultimately reducible to the sum of their parts, or at least controlled by them, we must begin by showing that their fundamental analysis is already flawed; the animate sphere is not directly reducible like the physics of a rock, nor are the higher forms of consciousness subject to the complete control of lower ones. The basic functional structure we have already outlined concerning the nature of tacit knowing provides the key.

First, however, let's review a few things Polanyi's theory has already shown us. We started by noticing that certain things, such as recognizing a face take place tacitly. That is to say, we don't go through a process of *explicit* inferences asking ourselves questions like, "what is the relative chin to mouth size, what is the relative distances between the eyes," and then use such explicit inferences to deduce who we are looking at. Because of this Polanyi concludes, "it is fruitless to inquire, the way such an inference is conducted."⁴⁶ Such explicit forms of describing our inferences is the way a computer would have to go about deciphering something like a face, but it is not the way we do it.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 19.

⁴⁶ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 32.

⁴⁷ Certain objections that modern critics of Polanyi have raised should be addressed here: Advances in computer science have called into question Polanyi's theories. The skeptic will argue with Polanyi here that just because such inferences take place tacitly doesn't mean that in fact they are not explicitly definable and thus we could in fact decipher what one might call the "Tacit Code." If such were the case, it would then be conceivable to program this explicit code for consciousness into a computer and create *Artificial Intelligence*. Modern neurology is also

This basic difference hints at what I think all of Polanyi's theories about tacit knowledge come back to trying to prove: *that consciousness is not an explicitly describable force like the physics governing a game of billiards, or of a star, and as such must be explained in some other way which accounts for how we see it actually working.* At the core, it could be said Polanyi is arguing for some sort of 'x factor' in all animate things, which in the tacit model is his 'organizing principle' and which most importantly, eludes the definition of more explicit fields of science.⁴⁸ It is because of this fact that consciousness differs from other explicitly describable things that scientific skepticism is incorrect when it tries to reduce it to the more powerful control of baser parts such as instincts or desires. This *other way* of describing how it works is what we're trying to get at here. If granted as true, it can help establish the realm of the intellect and even the moral sphere as capable of independence. If such is

trying to define this process and show the ways that the brain is ultimately responsible in an **explicit** mechanistic form, for how our *knowing* is definable. Neurologists would say that the connecting of particulars to create a comprehensive entity (to use Polanyi's language) is merely different parts of the brain following inference patterns *hardwired* into our heads that once uncovered, could be explained and explicitly defined. The neurologists believe the existence of what we call consciousness can thus be explained as product of definable cause and effect relationships, via the physical operations in our brains. In doing so, they would seek to explain the tacit ability in things such as how we recognize on sight a physiognomy of another person, or go about any process of inference for that matter. Two things should be noted here about this: 1.) Whether neurologist might be able in the future to "explain" the mechanisms of consciousness in the brain and whether or not they could explain the *active use* of these mechanisms in **explicit terms**, are two different matters. That is to say, whether or not they could define them too an extent that could be written down and plugged into a computer for instance. Not to mention that such a theory would not help *us* in the use of our brains, because no matter how well they could be explained to us, our real use of such things will always remain tacit 2.) Though all of this may turn out to be possible, it has not been achieved yet, so claims that this is the case are no more probable than Polanyi's theories until this is proved otherwise. At the current level of technology, no matter how a smart computer is taught explicitly *how to think* we have not created AI. As to chess computers, it should also be noted that most of their strategies are programmed by collecting thousands of moves from games played by real humans to infer the next move, while humans playing chess do not do this, but create inferences from their consciousness even without a host of examples to work from. Though of course, it could be argued that players of chess do in fact move by following such examples too, only tacitly, I do not think this form would show how a chess player is able to improve at chess even after reaching the top of his field, nor will it fit with what Polanyi's theories show about the nature of innovation, which we will develop in the section on *commitment*.

⁴⁸ **It is important to note here that Polanyi is not making an argument for the soul, just that there is a fundamental difference in animate things making them irreducible to the sum of all their parts.**

the case, then *personal responsibility* (which scientific skepticism will never trust as we saw from our historical analysis) can be shown to have a valid potential for governing itself and human affairs.

A few crucial implications from what we have already said must be thought out at this point to indicate where all of this is going. The existence of the so-called “organizing principle,” must further be shown as a real thing (a consciousness, a *person*). In doing so, we will help give two basic responses to how Polanyi might respond to the obstacles that stand in a way of our new doctrine of liberty.

The first is that as a consequence of the principle of irreducibility (along with a few more realizations) we will show a “hierarchical theory,” which describes both knowledge and consciousness within successive layers of the intellect. These layers, though controlled in part by baser things (such as desires or the material foundations of society), are not defined by such things, or subject entirely to the laws that govern such things. In the second half, the concept of indwelling as a basis of all knowledge will show that all knowledge is in an essential way *commitment* oriented and because of this, doubt cannot be the only way we uncover truth and is in fact itself a belief.

Basic structure behind Hierarchy

At the beginning of the last section we clarified the ability of consciousness to recognize a face or the shape of a rock in our tacit from-to framework for knowledge. But this is not all our structure of tacit knowing was shown to include. We also saw that tacit knowledge accounts for our perception of abstract things, such as a

problem or a skill, *and as natural extension of this we might also add now our ability to understand another person's personality*. When we interact with other people and try to figure out who they are, we are doing the same things as when we look at a problem. We are gathering a host of particulars, dwelling in them, and then trying to see the comprehensive entity of who this person is.

Polanyi argues from here that such things as knowledge of skills, problems, and even personalities, can be claimed to hold an existence just as real as rocks do. It is clear that our knowledge of all of these things is produced by the same method of knowing. That is to say, they are things of the world we comprehend through a tacit from-to structure. A person who learns a skill, whether mental or physical, has created a comprehensive entity which other people can come to see and even interiorize into themselves. Simple examples of this are dance students imitating the moves of the instructor, or chess players repeating those of a grand master. In doing so a student is interiorizing the particulars of movement, either physical or mental, and in a sense trying to dwell in the mind of his teacher and learn the comprehensive entity which the teacher holds as a master skill.

It is important to note here that a skeptic who claims such "skills" and "personalities" as having no real existence overlooks these things. To drive the point home (though this next part is not necessary for the overall argument) Polanyi even argues these things can be said to have a *deeper* existence than the rock. Polanyi notes that rocks are simply rocks, but that skills, problems, and people in the end tie into

many as-yet-unknown or unobserved facets of the world and experience. A stone of course carries no such expectation. This leads him to conclude that,

The capacity of a thing to reveal itself in unexpected ways in the future, I attribute to the fact that the thing observed is an aspect of reality, possessing a significance that is not exhausted by our conception of any single aspect of it.⁴⁹

The main point to recognize in the argument is simply that these *entities*, whether skills, problems, or personalities have a definite existence, and more importantly, that they are all part of our tacit framework of knowledge. Because of this fact, they must also be akin to the very same process of knowledge that we practice in regard to a rock or a face. Making this point might have seemed to stress the obvious, but it has important consequences when we return to the idea of irreducibility. These things have now been assigned a definite ontology and are recognized more clearly in the tacit framework.

Polanyi makes an intuitive leap at this point which in subsequent examples I think we can show as obviously true. He points out that because of the structural kinship in any knowing of any given comprehensive entity be it rock, skill, or man, “we would expect then to find the structure of tacit knowing duplicated in the principles which account for the stability and effectiveness of all comprehensive entities.”⁵⁰ But what does Polanyi see as this ‘structure’ that ‘ensures stability’ and what does this imply when we apply this structure to more complex entities than a rock?

Earlier in our sketch of tacit knowing we recognized this basic *structural facet* (though Polanyi never gives it this or any specific label) where,

⁴⁹ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 66.

⁵⁰ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 34.

(1) Tacit knowing of a coherent entity relies on our awareness of the particulars of the entity for attending to it; and (2) if we switch our attention to the particulars, this function of the particulars is canceled and we lose sight of the entity to which we had attended.

It seems that in shifting our awareness away from one we lose sight of the other.

Granted Polanyi could just be overlooking a weakness of the mind to multi-task, but this does not signify the specific reason why this shift in awareness produces difficulty.

The reason for this difficulty, one might guess, is that the particulars in themselves do not follow the exact same rules in isolation, as they do while in the process of serving together in the comprehensive entity. The necessary shift from the particulars to the entity suggests that the two ends of particulars and entity (proximal and distal) are different in some way. Admittedly, these two realms are *intimately* connected and definitely controlling one another, but the point is the control doesn't seem to be a direct one either way. One is not the sum of the other, but both rather exert marginal control over each other. Polanyi makes the distinction outlined here with a new definition for our structural facet of tacit knowing:

(1) that the principles controlling a comprehensive entity would be found to rely for their operations on laws governing the entity in themselves; and (2) that at the same time the laws governing the particulars in themselves would never account for the organizing principles of a higher entity which they form.⁵¹

All of this technical description might seem a little too much, but it is described here in a thorough way so as to leave no gaps. It shows us something very easy to see in almost every sphere of conscious activity. Take for example the game of chess. The playing of chess could be described as an entity. The playing of chess is controlled by

⁵¹ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 23.

certain principles which might be described in this *specific case* of an entity, as abstract things such as strategy and foresight (though it is very important not to confuse these things as always being the definition of the organizing principle. The organizing principle depends on what comprehensive entity we are talking about)⁵². The key point that Polanyi makes is that, “The upper one relies for its operations on the laws governing the elements of the lower one in themselves, but these operations of it are not explicable by the laws of the lower level.”⁵³ Simply put, the principles controlling the game cannot be derived from the rules. Rules (particulars) do not constitute the playing of the game, nor is the game comprised simply of all of the rules. Polanyi calls this the rule of *marginal control*.

Theory of Hierarchy

Here in very plain terms is the key point for refuting the skeptics from the foundation we have developed so far and the things it naturally describes. The model we have made very clear can be seen to describe a great many things that consciousness engages in. The next thing to show is how this from-to knowledge naturally develops into *successive levels of hierarchy*. When we realize how perfectly this model explains the successive levels of life in the animate sphere, it seems clear how a simple reduction of man by scientific skepticism to his baser desires is a misleading description. Here, however, are a few basic examples of hierarchy to show

⁵² It is important to note that just because Polanyi uses the term organizing principle this doesn't mean that the principle is always something like strategy or logic. As we shall see in the next examples, it all depends on the specific comprehensive we are attending to.

⁵³ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 31.

its basic structure, which we can then apply to our overall theory of life and humanity.

At the base of language we have the voice. With the voice we form words. Words are arranged into sentences. Sentences are ordered into a certain style and short argument. Arguments are woven into literary compositions, or theses like the one being written here. Each level is leading to the next and each is based on the one below it. This is exactly the same as the previous examples developed in our tacit theory of knowledge. The only difference here is that each unit is being stacked on the other which is its logical next step. If we apply what we have learned about the irreducibility of tacit knowing we can see how all these things operate under successive levels of marginal control. Each of these levels is governed by particulars, which are their rules organized into certain principles, and which serve as the further foundation of particulars that govern everything above. In our example these rules would be phonetics, alphabet, grammar, stylistics, and literary criticism. But from our model of knowledge we already know the irreducibility of all these things. Polanyi makes the point clear saying, “you cannot derive vocabulary from phonetics, you cannot derive grammar of language from its vocabulary; a correct use of grammar does not account for good style; and good style does not provide the content of a piece of prose.”⁵⁴ True, at each level the lower level exerts a degree of control over the upper one, but still the end product is not sum of its particulars or the rules of these particulars. And because of all this, “each level is subject to dual control, first by the

⁵⁴ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 33.

laws to its elements in themselves, and second by the laws that form the comprehensive entity formed by them.”⁵⁵ Further, at different links the organizing principle is being engaged in different ways and we have already shown how these are ways that cannot be explicitly defined.

This is an example of hierarchy. Almost all forms of animate matter or organized behavior follow this structure. Even abstract activities within one single realm of human activity follow this rule. Why is this important? Because this model is most clearly an exact example of the very way that all animate matter shows its successive stages of development. It describes the continuing levels of sophistication as seen in the evolution of life to perfect exactitude. When we look at man in this model the point becomes obvious. Polanyi makes the crucial connection in the following passage:

We can see all levels of evolution at a glance in an individual human being. The most primitive form of life is represented by the growth of a typical human shape, through the process of morphogenesis studied by embryology. Next we have the vegetative functioning of the organism, studied by physiology; and above it there is sentience, rising to perception and to a centrally controlled motoric activity, both of which still belong to the subject of physiology. We rise beyond this at level of consciousness behavior and intellectual action, studied by ethology and psychology; and, uppermost, we meet with man’s moral sense, guided by the firmament of his standards.⁵⁶

If we grant this as the way in which life structures itself in continual levels of sophistication increasing in complexity towards sentience, then such sentience is not reducible to the particulars that exist below it. The answer to the skeptics seems clear. Even if baser desires, instincts, or material necessities are rules and particulars

⁵⁵ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 36.

⁵⁶ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 37.

influencing the more sophisticated spheres of human existence, those things cannot be said to add up into who we are, or exert a necessarily dominate control over who we are. They exist under marginal control in a hierarchal structure. They might of course argue that the component moral sphere doesn't even exist at all, but to do so would not only claim that no man has ever been selfless or moral, but to refute Darwin himself who argued that such a moral awareness was the distinguishing factor of man and his highest level of sophistication. In his *Descent of Man* we can find confirmation to back up Polanyi, for the "moral" faculty is the one thing Darwin isolates as a mental activity that man partakes in, but which is not held by life forms below him. Even if they were to persist in saying this sphere doesn't exist, we would still have the undeniable realm of our intellect which is also not reducible. If the intellectual and moral spheres are granted as existing by our theory of knowledge and indeed as the fundamental way of describing all animate spheres and what makes them different from the inanimate, we can then conclude because of the non-explicit nature of each level's organizing principle in its existence as a sort of active skill, and the irreducibility inherent in the tacit from-to nature of consciousness, it can never be said that man is by any necessity the puppet of lower forms of the animate, such as the skeptics wrongfully conclude and fear.

Disestablishing Doubt and Restoring Belief

Nisi Credideritis Non Intelligitis: Unless ye Believe, ye shall not understand - St. Augustine.

If we grant hierarchy for describing consciousness then effectively we have proven that something such as the intellectual and moral spheres can be trusted to

exist independently. Personal responsibility can thus be a reliable thing despite what the skeptics say. I doubt, however, that the skeptics will take even this as proving anything, so a few last elements of Polanyi's thought seem very useful to present and maybe win some of them over to the fact that doubting is not always the way. We have already passed over this aspect of knowing in our lengthy discussion of Polanyi's theory of knowledge without recognizing its place.

The description of knowledge as a process of indwelling shows knowing is in fact a product of believing as much as doubting. In this process we are seen to incorporate within ourselves all the particulars and tools of our experience, tacitly, in order to use them in seeking out comprehensive entities and make sense of the world around us; i.e. to solve problems, make discoveries, and write theses. But to do so is already to say something that explicit theories of how we know cannot recognize as part of the process, because such a process is in fact relying on a sustained *commitment* by the knower that these particulars actually constitute such an entity, **before** that entity is discovered; and more to the point, before explicit connections between particulars might even have been made or even exist. That is to say, there is a necessary position of the knower passionately committed to something he does not know for sure as existing and may not even exist at all, yet he is still able to find grounds and passion to look for these connections, because he intuitively *believes* it is there in the mass of particulars that he is dwelling in. His belief, of course, is not always true and as such it is often the source of complete human error, but it is also it should be realized, and

indeed far more importantly, that it is almost always by this faculty human discovery and true human originality are made possible.⁵⁷ Polanyi describes this in *Personal Knowledge* saying,

Originality entails a distinctively personal initiative... From the first intimation of a hidden problem and throughout its pursuit to the point of its solution, the process of discovery is guided by a personal vision and *sustained* by a personal conviction.⁵⁸

Explicit definitions of the process of knowing, however, say that everything can be dissected to baser causes successively building upon themselves. Consciousness is a mechanism in such a view, with definitive reasons for every thought that occurs and a predictable direction of its future course; a view that the history of human discovery and innovation alone should dispel as ridiculous.

If knowledge is a process of indwelling, however, then it cannot be described in this way because knowledge is intuited out of the mass of interiorized particulars and not necessitated by outside particulars in control of it. Patterns and joint meanings are found only when they are first believed as being there, not as the result of one certain set of particulars leading to another and another and so on. The existence of new comprehensive entities, known or yet to be discovered, is thus a product of commitment to an intuition in this view, instead of from sequential causes playing out in predetermined orders. A person may be said to have **reasons** for why he believes

⁵⁷ Polanyi points out that the definitive *thing* that separates all animate spheres from inanimate ones is this; *the ability to error*, and thus this also separates it from something being explainable by explicit dissection of rules. For an in depth look at his discussion, one can look at the chapter entitled "Emergence" in *The Tacit Dimension*, Part II of *Personal Knowledge*, and certain areas of part three in *Knowing and Being*.

⁵⁸ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 301; for more detailed analysis of Polanyi's conception on commitment and belief, see his "fiduciary program"; outlined at length in *Personal Knowledge*.

some comprehensive entity exists, but this is entirely different from saying his belief has **causes**. Why? The basic fact is that reasons are by definitions also things believed in as they are guided in turn by other abstract principles. Such “operational principles,” are definitive features of animate matter, but this is another discussion not relevant to the matter here.⁵⁹ It is sufficient to recognize that they are not causes as the physics of matter are said to be causes and as scientific skepticism would try to pigeonhole all of humanity into its vision of the inanimate cause and effect; for they cease to exist the moment we no longer believe in them.

A great way to recognize this is that followers of doubt are in fact believers of doubt, the only difference being they never turn their doubt upon the process of doubt itself. Their doubt is a consistent commitment to the idea that by continually withholding judgment in all matters they can avoid error. Such a stance of always turning to doubt would in fact be one of the surest ways to error, however, as Polanyi makes clear when such a singular attitude is used in the pursuit of discovery by science, for ultimately:

There is no rule to tell us at the moment of deciding on the next step in research what is truly bold and what merely reckless, there is none either for distinguishing between doubt which will curb recklessness and thus qualify as true caution, and doubt which cripples boldness and will stand condemned as unimaginative dogmatism.⁶⁰

On the whole this is a very abstract description, but I think it captures as best as I am able to describe a point that Polanyi continues to return to in all of his theories over several books and many lengthy discussions time and time again. The only thing

⁵⁹ See theory of ‘Emergence’ in *The Tacit Dimension*.

⁶⁰ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 277.

that can account for this sustained belief (necessary in all truly original discoveries) is for this act to be guided by a *passionate belief* by the knower who is committed to the belief that there is a truth there to be discovered, and such a passion is by definition, a passion for truth. What this in fact signifies is a return to the whole discussion raised in the *Meno* and perhaps a novel solution to it, if one takes into account the whole program of *Tacit from-to knowing* we have developed. It is also a return to the ideas of Augustine and the whole turn of human thought that led to the rise of Christianity, which we saw in our historical interpretation. An important thing to realize in light of this, however, is that now such a turn in human thought was not wholly unwarranted, because as we now see *belief* does in fact play a role, and a crucial role at that, in discovering truth; even if it is not a conception of belief as one minded as medieval religion might have used it. Further, it is yet another refutation of scientific skepticism's position that consciousness can be reduced to the sum of baser and (as it is almost always also envisioned) more selfish causes. Finally, if we take commitment as a necessary function of living, as even Hume in private life was forced to do, doubt cannot be the foundation for our doctrine of liberty, because we cannot accept doubt as the supreme liberator of the mind. If we grant this to be a fundamental fact of the intellectual sphere, then we have made another critical step in supporting it as an independent entity. Our doctrine of liberty must then restore the role of belief to a comparable status as that of doubt in the human search for truth.

Resolutions

“The end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality.” - Aristotle

Aristotle wrote the quotation above in his *Nichomachean Ethics* over two thousand years ago and it seems to sum up quite poetically what it is that Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing attempts to add to any doctrine of liberty. Our historical analysis showed quite definitively that a doctrine of liberty founded purely on doubt and antiauthoritarianism is a self-contradictory formulation, whose end product hovers on the brink of producing totalitarianism. Extreme skepticism will never trust the idea of personal responsibility to sustain the moral sphere of society, because it will always attempt to reduce the individual to merely the puppet of what it sees as greater and often less moral forces. The result of this attitude is the downfall of the very liberalism and free inquiry that skepticism so often champions in the pursuit of truth. The pursuit of truth thus becomes an unfortunate casualty in the greater necessity of man to live harmoniously. It is because of this that our response to the skeptics must take the form of showing how it is that individual man and the moral sphere are unjustly defined by such views, and why because of this, the pursuit of truth should resume its rightful place above society and as the purpose of society.

I believe Polanyi's theories show a great deal of how all this might be possible. Consciousness is more than the sum of its parts and the process by which we go out and discover the world is the same process by which we define who we are. It's an active engagement of a knowing mind, which Polanyi attempts to show is, by the very

structure of its knowing, not explicitly reducible to the things that lie more basic to it; whether those things are seen simply as selfish desires, or more inclusively as desires to be good, to be moral, and ultimately to find truth. Commitment by the knower to these ideals makes it possible for the knower to discover these things in the world. Socrates had this commitment in his search for truth, even if his accusers feared ultimately he did not believe in anything. Socrates, however, was not a skeptic in the way of extremists in the modern world. The judgment of Socrates by Meletus was an unfair one, as seen by the lengths to which Socrates went for his belief in the power of a free and unobstructed mind and the liberal society that this promotes. It was a belief and a commitment that he held adamantly to the point of accepting even his own execution in proclaiming its truth.

Aristotle captured the form of what this belief entails, which Polanyi describes as commitment. It is the power this commitment holds that shows how personal responsibility achieves what the skeptic denies. It is the active skill we engage in and improve upon throughout our lives. Who we are is not a quality or a desire, but rather it is a skill and an art. If we are to strengthen the doctrines of liberty then it seems Polanyi's theories constitute as good a reply as any to the skeptical attitudes that persist to this day.

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