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POLANYI

THE ART OF KNOWING

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Patrick Henry College

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No book is the product of a solitary individual. Whether the author admits it or not, many contribute, in various ways, to its creation. Unfortunately, it is impossible to trace completely the lines of influence, the manifold ways that different people add to the content or alter the direction of the investigation. Fully aware of these limitations, I am happy to recognize some of those who helped to make this book what it is.

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The twentieth century was a time of marked contrasts. On the one hand, there were significant advances in standards of living (at least in the West); technological wonders brought the world together, as space was annihilated by electronic communication and air travel; lives were extended and health improved with the advent of penicillin, vaccinations, and organ transplants. But there was a dark side. With increased material wealth came a fixation on material goods and gain; increased mobility led to the fragmentation of families and communities; technological advances brought the potential to kill on a scale previously only dreamed of by madmen and prophets; advances in medicine have brought us to the age of biotechnology, where the very nature of the human species seems nearly within our manipulative grasp. Yeats, writing in 1920, surveyed the wreckage of Europe and penned words that described the scene and predicted with clear-sighted vision the moral and political chaos yet to be unleashed:
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.¹

The twentieth century witnessed both stunning advances in science and technology as well as the bloodiest killing spree in history. The convergence of these two facts is, in retrospect, not surprising. Optimism—optimism born of success—was clearly warranted in the realm of the sciences. But there were not corresponding advances in our moral understanding. Rather, a kind of skepticism came to maturity. Skepticism had, of course, long been in view—at first just on the horizon, no bigger than a man's hand, but steadily growing until it blotted the Western sky. Our wild advances in knowledge, it seems, did not automatically translate into advances in wisdom. As T. S. Eliot wrote:

Endless invention, endless experiment,  
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;  
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;  
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.  
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
But nearness to death no nearer to god.  
Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from god and nearer to the Dust.  

The advances of modern science, marked by so many obvious successes, gave science and the methods of scientific investigation a pride of place. But this also created a sense of autonomy that, when coupled with advancing moral and religious skepticism, served to make scientific and technological progress appear inevitable and moral and spiritual checks on that progress unnecessary. In this climate, the stage was set for utopian aspirations to run their course unhindered by the very forces that in an earlier age would have moderated them—and perhaps even strangled them in their infancy. Indeed, one might well describe the twentieth century as the bloodiest period of utopian political experimentation the world has ever witnessed.

Born in Budapest in 1891, Michael Polanyi came of age when the optimism of the early years of the new century was eclipsed by the horrors of the Great War. His firsthand encounter with modern warfare and later with totalitarianism in the form of both fascism and communism convinced this world-class physical chemist that the very foundations of civilization were in jeopardy. Polanyi recognized that the prevailing conception of the scientific enterprise—characterized by the ideal of the disinterested scientist’s strict detachment from his subject matter, which could ultimately be reduced to physics and chemistry—was seriously inadequate and ultimately misleading. The scientist, according to Polanyi, is no dispassionate observer; instead, he is passionate in his quest to make contact with a reality that he necessarily believes is real and knowable. Furthermore, the practice of science requires an ante-
ecedent commitment on the part of its practitioners to such transcendent values as truth, justice, and charity. Finally, these values must exist in the context of a community of scientists who pass on the values of science to aspiring young scientists, as a master trains an apprentice. Thus, according to Polanyi, science depends for its success on such things as tradition, submission to authority, personal commitment, and moral ideals.

Polanyi's career as a scientist was characterized by creative brilliance; there were those who believed he would eventually win a Nobel Prize in chemistry. But as the war-to-end-all-wars turned out merely to prepare the way for even worse political disorder, Polanyi's concerns turned gradually toward the problem of defending a free society against tyranny in all its forms. He first focused on economics and the practice of science. He was convinced that the success of both required liberty, and that "planned" science would destroy science, just as a "planned" economy would result in hunger and privation. But as he continued to consider the necessary foundations of a free society, Polanyi became convinced that at root the political terror of the twentieth century was the result of a conception of knowledge that refused to admit that moral and spiritual concepts have any real existence. Bereft of these, individual and political action is limited merely by imagination and will. To counter this descent into the moral abyss, Polanyi argued that a new conception of knowledge must be introduced—a conception that once again acknowledged the reality of moral and spiritual ideals to which free and responsible men and women can commit themselves in service to a truth rooted in reality which is infinitely richer than that assumed by reductionistic mate-
rialism. Thus, although Polanyi’s nonscientific work spans a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy of science, economics, theology, and epistemology, all of these pursuits spring from a common concern: a tireless attempt to reestablish a legitimate grounding for liberty. In this light, Polanyi should be understood as a political philosopher who rightly grasped that liberty depends on resources beyond politics.
ABBREVIATIONS

All page references in the text are to Polanyi’s writings. When referring to his books and articles, I use the following abbreviations:

**BOOKS**


ARTICLES


ABBREVIATIONS

