

## Personal Participation:

# Michael Polanyi, Eric Voegelin, and the Relationship Between Epistemology and Politics

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"The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid."

G.K. Chesterton

### Introduction

Both Michael Polanyi and Eric Voegelin fled their homeland (Hungary and Germany, respectively) to escape the Nazis, and this experience helped motivate the concerns and shape the thought of these two thinkers. Polanyi and Voegelin witnessed firsthand the moral and political depths opened up by those who were willing to embrace (whether explicitly or tacitly) a *Weltanschauung* which denied the reality of transcendent moral truth. Both sought through their scholarly work to point a way out of the philosophical dead-end which produced the horrors from which they managed to escape. In this paper I want to examine certain aspects of the thought of Polanyi and Voegelin with an eye to highlighting the important ways in which they are similar. I will begin by indicating how both find the modern conception of knowledge seriously wanting. What Polanyi terms "objectivism" and Voegelin calls "scientism" is the modern tendency to reduce knowledge to only that which can be scientifically demonstrated. This severely truncated view of knowledge has serious moral and political implications. These implications— what Polanyi identifies as "moral inversion" and Voegelin calls "gnosticism"— will be discussed. I will then briefly examine the view of reality held by both as well as the implications of their thought for the so-called fact/value dichotomy. Finally, I will indicate the complementary ways in which these two thinkers believe recovery is possible. I will argue that the epistemological solution encompassed in Polanyi's personal knowledge fits well with Voegelin's insistence that we must recover an awareness of human participation in transcendent reality. In the end, while certainly not identical, the solutions offered by both provide useful supports for the other: Polanyi's theory of knowledge adds an important dimension to Voegelin, while Voegelin's insistence on openness to the transcendent makes explicit what Polanyi only occasionally intimates.

### 1. Modern Deformation of Knowledge

*Polanyi and Objectivism* Modern philosophy is characterized by, among other things, a rejection of tradition. The early moderns initiated their inquiries by explicitly and categorically rejecting

the authority of the Aristotelian and religious traditions. Those traditions were seen as oppressive and a hindrance to the pursuit of truth. Any reliance on belief or tradition as a starting point for investigation was rejected. This ideal has continued to our day. Polanyi writes:

To assert any belief uncritically has come to be regarded as an offence against reason. We feel in it the danger of obscurantism and the menace of an arbitrary restriction of free thought. Against these evils of dogmatism we protect ourselves by upholding the principle of doubt which rejects any open affirmation of faith.

The twin streams of early modern philosophy, rationalism and empiricism, both rejected any dependence on tradition and authority. As Polanyi puts it, "Cartesian doubt and Locke's empiricism...had the purpose of demonstrating that truth could be established and a rich and satisfying doctrine of man and the universe built up on the foundations of critical reason alone." Polanyi believed that the modern-day descendants of Descartes and Locke were still pursuing their ideals in the twentieth-century, and that they manifested themselves in the form of both logical positivism and skepticism. These modern empiricists and skeptics "are all convinced that our main troubles still come from our having not altogether rid ourselves of all traditional beliefs and continue to set their hopes on further applications of the method of radical scepticism and empiricism."

The attempt to reject all dependence on tradition and authority gave rise to the ideal of explicit, objective knowledge. Tradition and authority are mediating elements which inevitably influence the mind subjected to them. A mind subjected to such influences cannot obtain the necessary distance to attain a purely objective and explicit grasp of the facts. Thus, the war on tradition is the attempt to rid the mind of epistemological mediaries that cloud and influence the mind and prevent the knower from accessing unmediated truth. According to Polanyi, "objectivism has totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all we can know and *cannot* prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we *can* prove." We must ask, then, whether or not such things as belief and tradition are epistemologically necessary. If so, then the ideal embraced by modern philosophy is self-contradictory, and it would follow that those who embrace this ideal inevitably produce incoherence within their systems of thought. Polanyi recognizes the epistemic role played by tradition and belief; thus, for him the rejection of these must be overcome if modern man is to recover the proper epistemological balance. In Polanyi's phrase, a "post-critical philosophy" must be developed.

*Voegelin and Scientism* Voegelin traces the same movement of thought as does Polanyi. In a 1948 essay titled "The Origins of Scientism" Voegelin locates the early signs of scientism in the second half of the sixteenth century, for "it is a movement which accompanied the rise of modern mathematics and physics." According to Voegelin, the impressive gains made in the various sciences created a self-assured cast of mind that led to an over-extension of science. In other words,

They began in a fascination with the new sciences to the point of underrating and neglecting the concern to experiences of the spirit; they developed into the assumption that the new science would create a world view that would substitute for the religious order of the soul; and they culminated, in the nineteenth century, in the dictatorial prohibition, on the part of scientific thinkers, against asking questions of a metaphysical nature.

Voegelin finds three principle features common to all scientific enterprises:

(1) the assumption that the mathematized science of natural phenomena is a model science to which all other sciences ought to conform; (2) that all realms of being are accessible to the methods of the sciences of phenomena; and (3) that all reality which is not accessible to sciences of phenomena is either irrelevant or, in the more radical forms of the dogma, illusory."

Voegelin argues that Newtonian physics, which requires as a postulate the notion of absolute space, along with the Cartesian materialization of extension, served to produce a philosophical picture of the universe in which there was no need—indeed, no room—for God. This theoretical removal of God denied the fundamental structure of reality and caused a loss of balance that manifested itself in the political movements of modernity. Indeed, for Voegelin, the "advancement of science and the rationality of politics are interwoven in a social process that, in the perspective of a more distant future, will probably appear as the greatest power orgy in the history of mankind."

The theoretical removal of God—what Voegelin in another work memorably terms "the murder of God"—necessarily places man in a new position of autonomy and self-reliance. Armed with this new freedom from divine control along with the ontological autonomy that comes with denying the existence of an essential human nature, scientific men are at liberty to attempt to re-create human nature in a more suitable fashion than that which had previously been tolerated. In short, scientific man is now free to exert his creative passions to produce "the man-made being that will succeed the sorry creature of God's making." The political outcome of this attempted reformulation of human nature, though, is quite at odds with any utopian visions of peaceful kingdoms, for "historically, the murder of God is not followed by the superman, but by the murder of man." Thus, according to Voegelin, a denial of God necessarily produces a false view of reality, which manifests itself in political movements that rest on raw power and ultimately results in murder. This historic reality highlights an important point: we must never fall victim to the belief that "an idea is politically unimportant because philosophically it is stark nonsense." But sadly those who, due to their scientific commitments, deny the reality of God, and thereby deny the fundamental structure of reality, spiritually emasculate themselves—they are in Voegelin's words "spiritual eunuchs." With the modern dominance of scientism, "the spiritual eunuchs became the socially effective formers of ideas for the masses." Thus, scientism produced spiritual eunuchs who became the vanguard of the intellectuals, who in turn, by their

commitment to scientism gave it a respectability that was undeserved on its purely scientific merits. This respectability paved the way for more scientific endeavors, for in Voegelin's words, "without the prestige effect of scientism, such major intellectual scandals as the social success of positivism, or Darwinian evolutionism, or Marxism would be unthinkable."

Scientism—what Polanyi calls objectivism—seeks to reduce all knowledge to that which can be empirically verified. Thus, the realm of facts is susceptible of scientific knowledge and is therefore objectively knowable, while the realm of values lies outside of the scientific methodology and therefore admits of only subjective knowledge. But, as with any theory of knowledge, there are inevitable moral and political implications.

## 2. Moral and Political Implications: Moral Inversion and Gnosticism

*Moral Inversion* Harry Prosch notes that Polanyi's "critique of contemporary epistemology was, in fact, generated by an ethical problem: the damage he thought this epistemology was doing to our moral ideals." Indeed, the moral and political implications of objectivism is a frequent topic in Polanyi's writings. This, perhaps, is not surprising given Polanyi's firsthand experience with and lifelong concern about the philosophical roots of totalitarianism. Polanyi's account of the moral implications of objectivism begins with an account of the historic changes wrought by modern thought.

As discussed above, the scientific revolution led by such men as Descartes and Bacon included a disdain for any knowledge based on tradition or authority. At a certain level this rejection was warranted, for in the limited range of scientific investigation empirical observation must be given a prominent role. The success of science in the last three centuries attests to the positive impact of a rejection of certain assumptions that found their roots in Aristotelian metaphysics and in sanctioned interpretations of Biblical texts. But, while a limited rejection of tradition and authority was beneficial to the scientific enterprise, the momentum of modern philosophy continued to push toward the wholesale rejection of all tradition and authority. This culminated in the intellectual and political events surrounding the French Revolution. Due to this radical shift in orientation away from tradition and authority, Polanyi argues that history can be divided into two periods. First, all societies that preceded the Revolution in France "accepted existing customs and law as the foundations of society." While it is true that there "had been changes and some great reforms...never had the deliberate contriving of unlimited social improvement been elevated to a dominant principle." On the other hand, the French Revolutionaries embraced with zeal the ideal of the unlimited progress of man, both morally and materially. "Thus, the end of the eighteenth century marks the dividing line between the immense expanse of essentially static societies and the brief period during which public life has become increasingly dominated by fervent expectations of a better future."

This optimistic and passionate drive toward human perfection, which resulted in a wholesale rejection of tradition and authority, produced another equally significant result. The combination of Cartesian doubt and Lockean empiricism produced a theory of knowledge that precluded any truth claims that did not admit of explicit rational justification. Thus, religious and moral claims

were *a priori* ruled out-of-bounds by a theory of knowledge that was construed in such a manner that its boundaries did not admit of such claims. This effectively produced a skepticism about all claims to knowledge not grounded in empirical investigation. Thus, the authority of religion, specifically Christianity, which had held a dominant position for fifteen centuries, was undercut at its foundations. Scientism became the new religion, and its priests, the scientists and modern philosophers, employed epistemological objectivism as their instrument of worship.

Skepticism, of course, is not unprecedented. In antiquity there were those who embraced a skeptical view of the world, but modern skepticism is different because it occurs in a culture steeped in the residue of Christianity. "The ever-unquenching hunger and thirst after righteousness which our civilization carries in its blood as a heritage of Christianity does not allow us to settle down in the Stoic manner of antiquity." Thus, although modern philosophy does not permit the consideration of the truth claims of Christianity, the memory of Christianity remains and produces a passionate urge to pursue righteousness despite the fact that modern philosophy has rendered the reality of moral truth impossible.

The result of this two-fold change is a situation in which deep moral impulses, which are the product of a Christian heritage, are combined with a skepticism that denies the reality of the very impulses modern man feels most acutely. Polanyi describes this situation as follows:

In such men the traditional forms for holding moral ideals had been shattered and their moral passions diverted into the only channels which a strictly mechanistic conception of man and society left open to them. We may describe this as a process of *moral inversion*. The morally inverted person has not merely performed a philosophical substitution of material purposes for moral aims; he is acting with the whole force of his homeless moral passions within a purely materialistic framework of purposes.

Moral inversion, then, is the combination of skeptical rationalism and moral perfectionism, which is nothing more than the "secularized fervour of Christianity." But, whereas moral perfectionism within a Christian context is moderated by the doctrine of original sin and the consequent need for divine grace (which spawns humility), the perfectionism of a post-Christian world provides no such moderating counterbalance. Thus, the moral perfectionism of Christianity persists despite the rejection of the doctrines which, in times of belief, prevented it from wrecking havoc on the society committed to its ideal. Furthermore, skeptical rationalism prevents any adequate justification for the moral impulses that course through the veins of western man. This seemingly contradictory marriage of incompatible elements allows individuals and societies to commit the most immoral acts—which according to the skeptic are not really immoral, since morality is an empty category—all in the name of a perfectionism, which is a longing rooted in a Christian heritage that has been rendered unbelievable. Thus, the ideal of moral perfection, which in Christianity was rooted in the transcendent, was immanentized due to the parameters established by modern epistemology. This immanentization occurred so that scientific methods could be brought to bear on what were heretofore moral and

religious affairs. Thus, the objectivity of science was allowed to sanction what were previously moral impulses in an attempt to bring about a purely immanent perfection without the hindrance of moral limitations on the means to that end. But why, Polanyi asks, should such a doctrine so obviously contradictory, be held, especially by moderns who pride themselves in their intellectual rigor? "The answer is, I believe, that it enables the modern mind, tortured by moral self-doubt, to indulge its moral passions in terms which also satisfy its passion for ruthless objectivity."

Polanyi distinguishes between two manifestations of this combination of rational skepticism and moral perfectionism. The first is personal, while the second is political. The first is found in the modern existentialist. In this view, traditional morality has no justification. Man's choice is all that exists apart from the bare facts of science. Thus, all moral ideals are discredited. "We have, then, moral passions filled with contempt for their own ideals. And once they shun their own ideals, moral passions can express themselves only in anti-moralism." This is the modern nihilist who denies any distinction between good and evil. Thus, on the personal level, moral inversion produces the individual nihilist, Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, for example. The second manifestation is political. When rational skepticism and moral perfectionism are embraced, the political restraints provided by traditional morality are destroyed. The perfectionist element demands the total transformation of society, but because moral distinctions are denied, there is no limitation on the political means to achieve the desired result. Thus, in political terms, moral inversion produces totalitarianism.

The problem of moral inversion is, for Polanyi, the direct result of a false theory of knowledge that does not allow the admission of moral truth as legitimate knowledge. While it is true that modern man has produced a stunning array of scientific and technological advances, moral progress has been much more ambiguous. The pendulum has swung too far in the direction of rationalism and skepticism. Thus, modern man "must restore the balance between his critical powers and his moral demands." This restoration, as we will see, takes the form of a return in the direction Augustine who, like Polanyi, recognized the fiduciary element undergirding all rational thought.

One question remains in the present discussion: how is it that some modern societies have apparently escaped the frenzied passion produced by moral inversion while others have not? This question is important because it appears to be the case that all modern western societies have, in fact, embraced the twin elements that constitute moral inversion, namely rational skepticism and moral perfectionism. The answer, according to Polanyi, is found in what he terms "pseudo-substitution." In short, those societies that have avoided the descent into immoral morality (i.e. totalitarianism) in fact continue to embrace traditional morality in practice all the while denying its reality in theory. This, according to Polanyi, merely indicates that "men may go on talking the language of positivism, pragmatism, and naturalism for many years, yet continue to respect the principles of truth and morality which their vocabulary anxiously ignores." Polanyi argues that both Britain and America have managed to escape the grim inhumanity of moral inversion by virtue of this dichotomy between practice and theory. This achievement was rendered possible by a sort of "suspended logic" by which the British and the Americans did not pursue their theoretical positions to their practical ends.

While pseudo-substitution apparently provides (at least temporarily) a way to avoid the negative consequences of moral inversion, it is obviously not ideal, for it does not dispense with the problem but merely holds it at bay through a process of self-deception. What Polanyi refers to as a recovery of balance between man's moral demands and his critical powers indicates a more stable solution, for it attempts to overcome the epistemological shortcomings of modernity, which have created the possibility of moral inversion in the first place. Thus, a recognition of the a-critical framework of our knowledge will re-open the philosophical possibility of obtaining real moral truth, and that recovery will destroy skepticism and thereby knock out one leg supporting moral inversion. Furthermore, such a recovery would once again make possible the legitimate discussion of religion and at least open the door to a more suitable religiously-informed anthropology which would knock out moral inversion's second leg. While a return to orthodox Christianity is perhaps unlikely, it is not, in Polanyi's argument, a necessary condition for avoiding the perils of moral inversion. A return to traditional religious forms might, though, be one of the outcomes produced by overcoming objectivist epistemology in favor of a theory of knowledge that recognizes the fiduciary framework upon which all knowing rests.

*Voegelin and Gnosticism* Although Voegelin, too, identifies the foundations of scientism in the sixteenth century, a broader category of noetic pathology of which scientism is a part is the class of movements Voegelin terms gnostic. Gnostic heresies were the focus of much attention by the early Christian writers, and according to Voegelin, the same gnostic impulse has continued within Christendom to our day. In brief, Voegelin identifies six characteristics of gnosticism. First, the gnostic is dissatisfied with his situation. Second, the gnostic believes that this unsatisfactory situation is due to the fact that the world is intrinsically poorly organized. Third, he believes that salvation from this poorly organized world is possible. Fourth, he holds that the order of being will have to be changed. Fifth, this change in the order of being can be produced through human effort. Sixth, this change can only be wrought by those who possess the special knowledge, the gnosis.

The gnostic is motivated by an all-consuming desire to escape the uncertainty of reality as encountered within the metaxy—the In-Between bounded by the divine ground of being and nothingness within which human noetic existence occurs—for the gnostic craves certainty above all else. Christianity, though, does not afford the certainty sought by the gnostic, for "uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity." One must walk by faith, which according to Hebrews 11:1 is the "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." In short, certainty is not the core of Christian belief. "Ontologically, the substance of things hoped for is nowhere to be found but in faith itself; and epistemologically, there is no proof for things unseen but again this very faith." Thus, gnosticism is an attempt to circumvent the ontological and epistemological uncertainty of the life of faith by attempting to alter the fundamental structure of reality better to produce certainty. This can only be accomplished by bringing the meaning of existence into the purview of human control: the transcendent truth of reality must be immanentized.

The attempt at immanentizing the meaning of existence is fundamentally an attempt at bringing our knowledge of transcendence into a firmer grip than the *cognitio fidei*, the cognition of faith,

will afford; and Gnostic experiences offer this firmer grip in so far as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man.

As we saw earlier, when God is murdered—that is when He is placed under the domination of man—the ensuing vacuum is filled by man, and historically, the result has been the inhumane treatment of man.

While the fear of uncertainty provides a negative impetus to grasp the ostensible certainty offered by gnosticism, the positive impetus driving modern gnosticism is the "Christian idea of perfection." But with God removed from the realm of theoretical possibility, the drive for perfection must be duly divorced from the transcendent context of the Christian tradition. This immanentized impulse toward perfectionism, which is unconstrained by any transcendent moral commitments, manifests itself in all manners of inhumane acts, the goal of which is a purely mundane perfection.

By way of a brief summary, Polanyi's moral inversion overlaps considerably with Voegelin's symbol of gnosticism. The two elements of moral inversion—rational skepticism and moral perfectionism—find counterparts in Voegelin's account. First, modern skepticism denies the existence of anything that cannot be empirically verified. Thus, the transcendent God of Christianity is rendered a priori untenable. Skepticism thoroughly immanentizes reality. Likewise for Voegelin, a central theme in modern gnostic movements is the denial of any transcendent reality. The second element of moral inversion is perfectionism. It is an impulse born within the Christian milieu which finds itself removed from its original context by the skepticism that made Christianity (indeed, theism) impossible. Cut loose from its theological moorings, this perfectionist impulse directs itself toward refashioning the world unhindered by transcendent moral restraints. The goal is a new world, one free from the flaws inherent in the old which was bound by superstition and transcendent commitments. This is gnosticism. For the gnostic is characterized by dissatisfaction with the given order of reality and an all-consuming desire to reform reality according to his purely immanent vision of the good, which is derived from the Christian idea of perfection. He optimistically believes that such an effort will produce the certainty for which he longs, that is, a perfected knowledge in which all uncertainties dissipate as he gains noetic dominance over reality by subsuming it within his immanent and finite capacities.

### 3. Recovery

Both Polanyi and Voegelin believe that the harmful consequences of modern thought can be overcome only by a fundamental reorientation of the mind. While their respective solutions are somewhat different, they are largely compatible and in many respects complementary. I think it is useful to understand these two approaches as addressing the same broad issue from two distinct perspectives. The core issue is one of belief. On the one hand, Polanyi presents a descriptive account of the fact of belief, while on the other hand, Voegelin offers a normative

account of the object of belief; or perhaps more simply, one focuses on epistemology while the other focuses on ontology. Polanyi emphasizes the descriptive and epistemological while Voegelin emphasizes the normative and ontological.

*Polanyi and a Return to St. Augustine* According to Polanyi, philosophy was born in Greece, and Greek rationalism reigned until the spiritual fervor of Christianity reached a climax with the thought of St. Augustine. Augustine "brought the history of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating for the first time a post-critical philosophy. He taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*." Thus, for the ancient Greeks, reason was primary. Augustine overturned that tradition by arguing that faith preceded reason. Modern philosophy, in turn, rejected the Augustinian primacy of belief with its rejection of all forms of tradition. Polanyi's critique of modern thought reveals its incoherencies. Modern thought has reached a dead-end, and in order to remedy the error, Polanyi claims "we must now go back to St. Augustine to restore the balance of our cognitive powers." This call for a return to Augustine is a call for a new post-critical philosophy.

Polanyi is quick to point out that he does not repudiate the incredible gains made in the modern period. "Ever since the French Revolution, and up to our own days, scientific rationalism has been a major influence toward intellectual, moral, and social progress." Yet, in spite of the obvious progress, there has been a darker side. Polanyi is convinced that the moral and political tragedies of the twentieth-century clearly reveal the logical consequences of an errant view of knowledge. "The question is: Can we get rid of all these malignant excrescences of the scientific outlook without jettisoning the benefits which it can still yield to us both mentally and materially?" For Polanyi, then, the obvious benefits produced by modern science have been accompanied by a corresponding crisis of knowledge, which has manifested itself in inhumane acts of unspeakable proportions. The problem must be dealt with at its roots: a new approach to knowledge must be adopted.

Keeping these awful aspects of our situation tacitly in mind, I shall try to trace a new line of thought along which, I believe, we may recover some of the ground rashly abandoned by the modern scientific outlook. I believe indeed, that this kind of effort, if pursued systematically, may eventually restore the balance between belief and reason on lines essentially similar to those marked out by Augustine at the dawn of Christian rationalism.

Polanyi's call for a return to Augustine is not a call to reject all appeals to reason or to reject the importance of science or other secular pursuits; instead, it is a call to recognize the indispensable role belief plays in all knowing. Modern philosophy, which insists that all knowledge be either rationally or empirically demonstrable, produced a discrediting of belief—all claims to knowledge that were not susceptible to demonstration were denigrated as subjective opinion. Polanyi is attempting to recover a view of knowledge that once again recognizes the indispensable role of belief. In a key passage he writes:

We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.

But if belief necessarily underlies all thought, it follows that authority, submission, and trust precede knowing, for belief entails submitting in trust to an authority and only subsequently understanding fully the content of that to which one submitted. Thus, for Polanyi, belief—that is a fiduciary framework—is an essential component of all knowing, and although one can deny that this is the case, such denials reflect a blatant error that requires affirming in practice that which is being denied in theory. Belief, then, is central to Polanyi's descriptive account of the fundamental structure of all knowing. Although the denial of this structure has severe moral and political implications, the actual structure is impossible to obviate. There are, then, normative implications for denying the descriptive fiduciary account, but the structure itself is unavoidable.

Polanyi's account of tacit knowing make clearer the fiduciary nature of knowing. Tacit knowing is comprised of two types of awareness. When we attend directly to an object we are aware of it focally. It is the explicit object of our attention, and our awareness of it is the subject of our concerns. But all focal awareness is accompanied by subsidiary awareness. We attend focally to a particular object (or concept) while attending subsidiarily to a variety of clues that are not the objects of our attention. The integration of these two kinds of awareness constitutes tacit knowing. Polanyi appropriates the findings of Gestalt psychology to describe his theory of knowledge. In short, Gestalt psychology, in Polanyi's words, claims that "the particulars of a pattern or a tune must be apprehended jointly, for if you observe the particulars separately they form no pattern or tune." Polanyi gives his readers several examples that serve to clarify the distinction between focal and subsidiary. The following is one of his favorites.

When a person employs a probe to explore a hidden cavity, or when a blind person uses a stick to find his way along an unknown path, the individual is aware of the impact the handle produces in his hand when the probe strikes an object, but the individual attends to these impacts subsidiarily. His focus is upon the end of the stick, and by attending focally to that while attending subsidiarily to the impact of the stick in his hand, he is able to comprehend objects by virtue of the stick. In a certain respect, the probe becomes an extension of his own body, and it is for this reason that subsidiary awareness and focal awareness can be understood in terms of physiology and identified as proximal and distal. The proximal term is that which is closest to one's body—in actuality it is that which is either part of one's body, as in a hand or a limb, or that which becomes an extension of one's body, as in a probe or any other tool. We dwell subsidiarily in the proximal term in order to dwell focally upon the distal term. This subsidiary-focal relationship is one that can be characterized as a *from-to* relation. We attend *from* the subsidiaries *to* the focal target. All knowing this thus constituted.

The from-to nature of tacit knowing reveals an important feature of the nature of human cognition, for it puts the human knower at the center of the knowing process. This is the central motivating purpose of Polanyi's epistemological project. The modern ideal is strict detachment in which complete objectivity is achieved by removing the knower from the knowing process. In his preface to *Personal Knowledge* Polanyi admits that the ideal of detachment is perhaps a harmless (though false) ideal when dealing with the exact sciences, but "it exercises a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science. I want to establish an alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally." Since all knowledge is rooted in the subsidiary-focal integration, it is quite accurate to claim that "all knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge. A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable." Furthermore, "the ideal of a strictly explicit knowledge is indeed self-contradictory; deprived of their tacit coefficients, all spoken words, all formulae, all maps and graphs, are strictly meaningless." But if all knowledge consists of the subsidiary-focal relationship, and the subsidiaries represent the bodily indwelling of the knower in an active integration of the two elements, then it follows that "all tacit knowing requires the continued participation of the knower, and a measure of personal participation is intrinsic therefore to all knowledge." If this account of knowing is accurate, the twin ideals of objective detachment and completely explicit knowledge are rendered impossible, for the active participation of the knower is indispensable as are the subsidiaries which do not admit of explicit formulation.

*Voegelin and Belief* For Voegelin belief is no less important, but his account entails a primary normative element that is not present in Polanyi, whose account, as we have seen, includes a secondary normative element but is primarily descriptive. In other words, while Polanyi focuses on arguing that belief underlies all we know, Voegelin focuses on the normative structure of that belief—the content or direction of belief is of primary concern for Voegelin. One of Voegelin's later essays, "The Beginning and the Beyond," which was published posthumously, contains a detailed discussion of the topic of belief, and this will provide us with important insights into the manner in which Voegelin held belief to be indispensable. But prior to looking at that essay we must first briefly investigate Voegelin's symbol of *metaxy*, for only when that is clearly understood can we comprehend Voegelin's account of belief.

Throughout his later work Voegelin devotes considerable time to describing the nature of the *metaxy*, the In-Between, which is a symbol denoting the ontological characteristic of human experience. Taking his cue from the Anaximandrian fragment and several Platonic dialogues (especially the *Symposium* and the *Philebus*), Voegelin envisions human conscious existence as a participatory (*metaleptic*) event that differentiates within the questing of human nous toward the divine ground of being. But this movement is not unidirectional, for the "reality of existence, as experienced in the movement, is a mutual participation (*methexis, metalepsis*) of human and divine." Furthermore, and creating an extraordinary philosophical complexity, "the language symbols expressing the movement are not invented by an observer who does not participate in the movement but are engendered in the event of participation itself." Thus, there exists, by virtue of human conscious existence, an epistemological uncertainty that makes indubitable noetic foundations unattainable. The fact that human existence is uncertain, though, is surprisingly revealing, for the fact of uncertainty implies an awareness of the possibility of ignorance, which in turn opens the door to the possibility of truth. In other words, the fact that human minds are capable of identifying the categories of ignorance and knowledge implies a

certain degree of knowledge, but the fact that ignorance is a live possibility also implies the tenuous and uncertain stance human consciousness takes toward knowledge. This In-Between characteristic of human existence pertains to those elements most fundamental to reality: knowledge, time, perfection, and life itself. Thus, metaxic existence is "in the In-Between of ignorance and knowledge, of time and timelessness, of imperfection and perfection, of hope and fulfillment, and ultimately of life and death." Human existence, for Voegelin, lies between these opposing nodes; thus, the "metaxy is the domain of human knowledge. The proper method of its investigation that remains aware of the In-Between status of things is called 'dialectics'; while the improper hypostasis of In-Between things into the One or the Unlimited is the characteristic defect of the speculative method that is called 'eristics.'"

For those not content with the painstaking noetic gains achieved through dialectics, the uncertainty of existence in the metaxy is disconcerting and can produce abortive attempts to consummate the metaxy by forcing the transcendent node into the realm of the immanent, for only if reality is so reduced can human understanding pretend to know reality with certainty. This rebellion against metaxic existence is driven by an (understandable) desire for "a stronger certainty about the meaning of existence." But, ironically, in an attempt to dominate reality by immanentizing it, this "pneumopathological" movement in actuality so distorts reality that the pseudo-knowledge gained from the deformation is not of reality at all but a metastatic counterfeit that ultimately produces disorder in the souls of those who stage such revolts against reality.

Any philosophical investigation into the nature of the metaxy will only exhibit truth if the investigation, itself, is conducted from within this tensional structure. In other words,

Since no reflection on the Metaxy can be true unless it is conducted from a position within the metaleptic truth-reality, neither the events of experience and symbolization, nor the process of the events as a whole, can become objects of analytical conceptualization for an external subject of cognition.

Thus, since the truth of existence is only approachable from within the metaxy, which is an ontological orientation that cannot be demonstrated or even adequately comprehended except from within the metaxy itself, philosophical investigation begins not with an Archimedean point that in Cartesian fashion can be indubitably known; instead, true knowing must begin with a commitment of faith or belief in the ontological reality of metaxic existence. In short, ontology must precede epistemology, and one's initial commitment to the ontological truth of the metaxy requires faith. Thus, faith or belief provides the framework within which reason properly operates, and the noetic quest occurs as a consequent as reason seeks to provide a rational account of the initial movement of faith. Both faith and reason, then, play essential noetic roles, and to ignore or deny the importance of either is to deform the nature of the knowing process.

Voegelin looks to Saint Anselm as an example of one who, in the Augustinian tradition, understands the necessary relationship symbolized in *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in search of understanding. Voegelin's reflection on the structure of this symbol "is consciously an expansion of the *fides quaerens intellectum* beyond Anselm's Christian horizon to the manifold

of non- and pre-Christian theophanic events, as well as to such order as can be discerned in the revelatory process." Thus, Voegelin looks to this symbol for insight into the structure of knowing and extends it from the explicitly Christian field in which it was first articulated into the broader context of non-Christian experience.

According to Voegelin, commentators have consistently misconstrued the intention of Anselm's *Proslogion*, epitomized perhaps most clearly in Kant dubbing it the "ontological" argument for the existence of God. These commentators have been so intent on considering whether or not the argument succeeds that "the fides behind the quest has practically faded away." Far from being at its core an argument attempting to prove the existence of God, the *Proslogion* is presented by Anselm in the form of a prayer. Obviously, a prayer presumes the existence of God; thus, it would appear that Anselm is assuming that which he is attempting to prove—a classic case of begging the question. But he is guilty of the fallacy only if the primary function of the *Proslogion* is to demonstrate the existence of God. Voegelin denies this is the case. Instead, "the *Proslogion* is not a treatise about God and his existence, but a prayer of love by the creature to the Creator to grant a more perfect vision of His divinity." This prayer is "a movement of the soul" in which "not Anselm's reason is in quest of understanding but his faith."

The nature of Anselm's quest indicates that "one cannot prove reality by a syllogism; one can only point to it and invite the doubter to look." But such looking implies a degree of trust in the one who points as well as "a trust in the existence of the unknown structure, a sort of anticipatory knowing of the unknown." Here we see at the core of true inquiry a necessary movement of faith, which far from being replaced once an adequate rational account is achieved, remains as an essential ingredient in all true knowing. Thus, "the noetic act, as a *fides quaerens intellectum*, does not destroy the *fides* it tries to understand." The essential structure of belief remains intact and ultimately undergirds the noetic questing of reason.

The thought of both Polanyi and Voegelin presupposes a commitment to the moral structure of reality, and it is to their respective commitment to this concept that we will now briefly turn, for this view of reality has important implications for the so-called fact-value distinction so broadly accepted by modern philosophers.

#### 4. Reality and Values

*Polanyi* Polanyi's commitment to realism is a central feature of his thought. But for him reality is not simply and readily accessible. He frequently speaks of "contact with a hidden reality" and an "intimation of a hidden reality." This view of reality as given but not immediately accessible in its totality underlies Polanyi's account of discovery, for an intimation of an unknown yet knowable coherence explains how one can pursue an answer that is yet unknown and justifies his claim that "we can know more than we can tell." He writes:

We can account for this capacity of ours to know more than we can tell if we believe in the presence of an external reality with which we can establish contact. This I do. I declare myself committed to the belief in an external reality gradually accessible to knowing, and I regard all true understanding as an intimation of such a reality which, being real, may yet reveal itself to our deepened understanding in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations.

The above definition of reality contains at least four important points that recur throughout Polanyi's work when he defines reality. First, reality is external to the knower. In other words, the essence of reality is not dependent upon the mind of the knower—it exists even if it is not apprehended. Second, reality is knowable. We can establish contact with it. Our minds are such that they can comprehend the reality that is external to them. Third, contact is gradual. We continually attempt to extend or strengthen our contact with reality, but this is never a once-and-for-all event. Instead, it is an endeavor we share with those who have gone before and anticipate for those who will come after us. Finally, the real, being real, may manifest itself in "indefinite" and "unexpected" ways. Thus, "when we accept the discovery as true, we commit ourselves to a belief in all these as yet undisclosed, perhaps as yet unthinkable, consequences."

Polanyi's theory of knowledge, which includes his commitment to realism, clearly calls for a reconsideration of the so-called fact-value distinction. If we agree with Polanyi that all knowing includes the personal participation of the knower and operates within a fiduciary framework, then it follows that all knowing, both scientific and humane, are on the same epistemological footing. Thus, "the moment the ideal of detached knowledge was abandoned, it was inevitable that the ideal of dispassionateness should eventually follow, and that with it the supposed cleavage between dispassionate knowledge of fact and impassioned valuation of beauty should vanish." The obvious conclusion to be drawn is one that "denies any discontinuity between the study of nature and the study of man." This conclusion flies in the face of modern thought which, in its attempt to protect science from any subjective element, erected the fact-value barrier. But, in Polanyi's words, "it has now turned out that modern scientism fetters thought as cruelly as ever the churches had done. It offers no scope for our most vital beliefs and it forces us to disguise them in farcically inadequate terms." Polanyi offers his post-critical theory of knowledge in an attempt to give legitimate voice to those things we value most despite the fact that they are not empirically verifiable.

Polanyi argues that moral reality, like scientific reality, has a status that is independent of the knower. Polanyi refers to the truths that direct our actions and to which we ought to submit as "transcendent obligations," which include truth, justice, and charity. These cannot be derived as conclusions to a deductive argument. Instead, "belief in them can therefore be upheld now only in the form of an explicit profession of faith." These ideals serve as subsidiaries in the active event of tacit knowing, and as subsidiaries they are largely unspecifiable when serving in that capacity.

Indeed, we cannot look at our standards in the process of using them, for we cannot attend focally to elements that are used subsidiarily for the purpose of shaping the present focus of our attention. We attribute absoluteness to our standards, because by using them as part of ourselves we rely on them in the ultimate resort, even while recognizing that they are actually neither part of ourselves nor made by ourselves, but external to ourselves.

*Voegelin* No less than Polanyi, Voegelin's thought is undergirded by a commitment to the view that reality is given and that this reality is normatively structured. Voegelin frequently employs such phrases as "the structure of reality" and "the order of being" to describe his conception of the nature of reality. For Voegelin reality is an unchanging fact the structure of which remains a constant regardless of the variety of ways humans attempt to conceptualize it. As we saw above in his discussion of Saint Anselm, Voegelin argues that "one cannot prove reality by a syllogism; one can only point to it and invite the doubter to look." Reality, then, is knowable but ultimately not demonstrable. We achieve deeper insight into the structure of reality by first believing that there is a structure given in reality and that human questing (with divine help) is capable of gaining deeper insight into that reality. The ensuing noetic quest seeks the hidden structure of reality and is motivated by a longing for that which is not yet known. In this way contact with reality is achieved.

Reality is a whole, and humans, being part of that reality, exist within this given structure. Human existence within the structure of reality is neither one of domination nor pure objectivity, for one cannot dominate that of which one is a part nor can one separate one's self from the fundamental structure that makes the noetic quest possible. Instead, "man's existence is participation in reality." This participation is neither a particular mode of thought nor an occasional posture, for "participation in being...is not a partial involvement of man; he is engaged with the whole of his existence, for participation is existence itself."

As we have seen, for Voegelin, human participation in reality takes place within the metaxy, in which humans exist between the divine ground of being, which is ontologically non-contingent, and the non-being of death. The divine ground of being is that toward which men ought to strive, for participation in reality "imposes the duty of noetically exploring the structure of reality as far as it is possible and spiritually coping with the insight into its movement from the divine Beginning to the divine Beyond of its structure." A duty noetically to pursue the divine ground of being implies that humans can choose to ignore this duty or deny the divine structure of reality that makes such a duty comprehensible. But such a rejection of the fundamental structure of reality results in the pathology of gnosticism of which we have already spoken.

Scientism, one of the most prevalent forms of modern gnosticism, rests on the false assumption that it is possible for the scientist to achieve a completely detached viewpoint from which to observe the facts of his investigation with absolute objectivity. According to scientific thought, any investigation into the world of facts must necessarily separate itself from the subjective influence of values. Like Polanyi, Voegelin recognizes that this ideal is not only false in practice but necessarily false. It is necessarily false if reality is as Voegelin describes it, for if the human situation is inevitably one of participation, then objective detachment is simply an impossible

ideal. Furthermore, despite claims to the contrary, scientists do bring values to bear on their scientific investigations. If scientism operated consistently within its own premises, every fact acquired by means of the prescribed methodology would be considered precisely equal in value. But this is patently not the case, for the very scientist who denies any overt appeal to values inevitably values some methodologically-derived facts over others. This preference, while essential to the work of science, is inexplicable in scientific terms. According to Voegelin the fact-value distinction "made sense only if the positivistic dogma was accepted on principle." But such a position could only be accepted by thinkers who had either rejected or ignored classical and Christian philosophy.

For neither classic nor Christian ethics and politics contain 'value-judgments' but elaborate, empirically and critically, the problems of order which derive from philosophical anthropology as part of a general ontology. Only when ontology as a science was lost, and when consequently ethics and politics could no longer be understood as sciences of the order in which human nature reaches its maximum actualization, was it possible for this realm of knowledge to become suspect as a field of subjective, uncritical knowledge.

In short, only by rediscovering the science of ontology with the implied anthropology entailed therein, can the false and ultimately harmful divide between facts and values be overcome. This rediscovery of ontology will have at its center a recognition that human existence is participation in reality one pole of which is divine.

## Conclusion

The essential structure of belief, which provides the framework within which reason finds its existence, presupposes an ontological commitment in Voegelin that is less explicit in Polanyi. For Polanyi, knowing necessarily entails the integration of the focal and subsidiary elements by the active participation of the knower. This is an epistemological claim that requires no mention of transcendent reality. At the same time, Polanyi is quick to point out that his theory of knowledge, by giving credence to beliefs that are not empirically verifiable, provides a way to reclaim religious, moral, and aesthetic belief that was rendered purely subjective by modern philosophy. But this opening toward religious belief is a consequent of his theory of knowledge rather than its antecedent. For Voegelin, on the other hand, openness to the divine ground of being is a necessary antecedent for all subsequent true knowing. To begin the noetic quest by first closing off any access to the transcendent is to deform reality and necessarily results in a distorted conception of that reality. True knowing requires a proper orientation to the metaxy, and such orientation presupposes a recognition that the noetic quest occurs within the metaxy and is characterized by an openness to the transcendent reality of divine being. This is an

ontological claim that is also normative in nature. It is qualitatively different than Polanyi's conception of knowing which is epistemological and descriptive.

That these two thinkers should approach the present subject from such different directions is not surprising considering their respective backgrounds. Polanyi, the scientist-turned-philosopher begins with the practice of science. As a practitioner, he understood better than most that the accounts of scientific discovery offered by the objectivists were simply wrong. He understood the epistemological role played by tradition and authority as well as the fact that unspoken, tacit elements make all explicit knowing possible, and therefore, he recognized the impossibility of epistemological detachment. Thus, Polanyi begins with a description of the process of knowing and moves in the direction of ontology. On the other hand, Voegelin begins his inquiry from the position of a theorist and seeks to establish an account of human consciousness in terms of the reality in which consciousness exists. Thus, Voegelin's work focuses on the ontological and engages epistemology only as a sub-set of larger concerns.

The fact that these two thinkers begin from such different contexts yet end up in much the same place provides a note of confirmation that they are grasping the same reality, and because they are approaching this reality from quite different perspectives, their respective theories serve as complements to each other. If both are analyzed in light of the other, it becomes clear that the epistemological insights of Polanyi are helpful additions to Voegelin's understanding of knowing, while Voegelin's ontological account of reality provides an overarching context for Polanyi's description of the nature of knowing.

On the one hand, Polanyi's account of tacit knowing fits comfortably and beneficially within Voegelin's account of the metaxy whereby human knowing proceeds without the security of an indubitable foundation and where belief necessarily initiates the noetic quest. Polanyi's profound insights into the nature of knowing can add an important dimension to Voegelin whose concerns are less with the mechanics of knowing than with a theory of consciousness that makes knowing possible. Furthermore, while Polanyi begins with epistemology, his conclusions lead him in the direction of Voegelin's concerns, so we should not be surprised when his arguments often bring him to the frontiers of the divine. Sounding a Voegelinian note, Polanyi argues that objectivism must be overcome if we are to "restore the balance of our cognitive powers" and such a restoration can only occur if we "go back to St. Augustine." In other words, we must recognize the fiduciary framework of all knowledge and in so doing overcome the prejudice produced by our modern commitment to objectivism. This shift in self-understanding will reestablish the contingent and dependent nature of human cognition and ultimately serve to point to a truth that transcends human cognition. This, in Polanyi's words, is "a clue to God."

On the other hand, Voegelin's recognition that human noetic existence occurs within the metaxy, and that human nous strives toward insight into the divine nature of reality, provides an important ontological as well as normative structure that Polanyi's account does not provide in any systematic fashion. For although Polanyi frequently nods in the direction of God, he only occasionally makes extended reference to the implications of his theory of knowledge for our understanding of divine reality. He does, though, acknowledge that an openness to God may be the final end of society, for he admits that "the advancement of well-being therefore seems not to be the real purpose of society but rather a secondary task given to it as an opportunity to fulfill its

true aims in the spiritual field. Such an interpretation of society would seem to call for an extension in the direction towards God." This Polanyian intimation lends itself to a Voegelian extension and shows how these two thinkers ought to be understood in reference to each other.

As we have seen, Polanyi's theory of knowledge opens the door to a recovery of religious as well as moral and aesthetic truth. But this movement comes as a consequent of his theory of knowledge. On the other hand, Voegelin's account of the metaxy presupposes a divine reality. He asserts this claim as a necessary postulate of further true thought not as a consequence of an argument. Thus, like Saint Anselm, Voegelin begins with a commitment to a vision of divine being, and his philosophical efforts represent *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in search of understanding. Polanyi's descriptive account of how belief functions on the epistemological level furthers this understanding, for Polanyi recognizes that his theory of knowledge seems to point toward the divine. Thus we have with Polanyi a reasonable account of how a theory of knowledge can have transcendent implications— an account that ultimately provides a rational justification for Voegelin's initial movement of faith. In short, Voegelin's *fides quaerens intellectum* is furthered by Polanyi's theory of knowledge, while Polanyi's theory of knowledge is given ontological moorings by Voegelin.

Despite the fact that Polanyi and Voegelin are working from quite different directions, both are trying to secure similar ends, for by making room for real knowledge of transcendent truth both Polanyi and Voegelin stake out their positions in opposition to those whose view of knowledge is truncated by a false conception of both the nature of knowing and the nature of reality. The moral and political ramifications of these false positions can only be thwarted by a reconceptualization of knowledge along the parallel lines suggested by Polanyi and Voegelin, a reconceptualization that is rendered even more formidable by a marriage of the two.