

The False Dilemma of Modernity

Mark T. Michell

WE MODERNS FACE A DILEMMA. On the one hand stands the grandeur of enlightenment rationalism, claiming that humans are capable of achieving certain knowledge of universal truths by virtue of the rational minds with which we are endowed. On the other hand stand the so-called postmodernists, who deny any form of epistemological foundationalism and hold that truth is nothing but the construction of a particular society; thus, all truth claims are necessarily local in nature, and aspirations to universal, objective truth represent mistakes at best and intellectual imperialism at worst. In this essay, I want to explore the nature of this dilemma and suggest a third alternative, an alternative that does not succumb to the aspiration of a God's eye-view, as does the enlightenment rationalist, or retreat into the misshapen hovel of relativism with its attendant subjectivism, as do the post-modernists. In essence, the alternative I will suggest overcomes the problem of modernity by pushing beyond it while at the same time reaching back to recover a pre-modern insight that was jettisoned by those committed to the modern project. Two thinkers who repre-

MARK T. MITCHELL *teaches philosophy and political theory at Patrick Henry College. His book, Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing, will be published by ISI Books in 2006.*

sent the temporal nodes of this third way are the much neglected twentieth-century thinker Michael Polanyi and the great fourth-century father St. Augustine.

I

Modern theories of knowledge are characterized by their underlying skepticism. Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, set the stage with his sweeping rejection of tradition and his methodological doubt to which he subjected all possible objects of knowledge. The corrosive work of Cartesian doubt eliminates from the realm of knowledge all that cannot be known "clearly and distinctly." While Descartes's conclusions are not widely accepted in the academy today—he managed, for instance, to maintain his Christian belief—his methodology transformed modern philosophy. The rise of scientism resulted, with its confident claim to universality and certainty—the new scientific methodology alone yields true knowledge.

But the optimistic promises of enlightenment rationalism, while producing stunning gains in science and technology, seemed, ironically, to open the door to an inverse movement in the humane fields of inquiry. With technological advances, of course, came greater killing potential—a more efficient means of dis-

posing of one's enemies. Because it falls outside the purview of modern scientific methodology, morality—along with religion and aesthetics—was reduced to the status of opinion. Once that occurred, it was quite easy to justify acts of brutality, for when the notion of objective good is removed, the means necessary to achieve one's desired ends are quite insignificant. Thus, modernity, with its universal aspirations conjoined with its radical skepticism, presided over some of the most inhumane acts ever witnessed and did so with the gusto born of rigorous consistency. That is not to say that those individuals who carried out the acts escaped with consciences untouched, but the philosophical assumptions which served as justificatory premises for those acts were not compromised in the process.

Something had to be done. But still the corrosive effects of skepticism continued to extend its influence, for rather than reconstituting philosophy to make room for the humane subjects alongside (or even superior to!) science, the opposite occurred. Science was demoted so that it, too, was seen as producing conclusions completely disconnected from any independently existing reality. All knowledge was reduced to the realm of subjective opinion. The dream of universal certainty gave way to a world filled with disjointed particulars. The radical differences between societies seemed to verify the thesis that all truth is socially constructed and local in scope. Morality, in such a scheme, was necessarily a matter of group preference, and truth became the casualty of a particularism whereby skepticism forbade any attempts toward reasserting the universalism that had failed so miserably.

The apparent dilemma that emerges from this brief account is one that currently besets those of us who participate in this narrative we call the western tradition. In short, the dilemma comes to this: We must embrace either enlightenment

rationalism, along with its ideals of universalism and certainty born of initial doubt, or postmodernism, with its particularism and relativism. Since it seems evident that the ideals of the enlightenment rationalist are impossibly lofty, we are, it appears, left with the rather dismal post-modern alternative. But before accepting such a lackluster solution, perhaps we should reconsider. Since enlightenment rationalism was grounded in a deep and all-encompassing skepticism, and since that skepticism, when it had worked its way to the core of western thought, ultimately brought about the demise of enlightenment rationalism itself, it follows that rather than two alternatives to the same problem, enlightenment rationalism and postmodernism nihilism represent two stages of a continuous development. Given the premises upon which enlightenment rationalism was grounded, post-modern nihilism was the inevitable result. In order to escape this downward spiral brought about by an approach to knowledge that gave primacy to doubt, we must somehow free ourselves from the strictures of Cartesian methodology that has served as the overriding motif of the present narrative. In short, where modern theories of knowledge begin with methodological doubt, which, as we have seen, leads to the nihilistic conclusions of post-modernism, what if real knowledge can only be acquired if one begins instead with *belief*? What if it is the case that, as Polanyi puts it, "to destroy all belief would be to deny all truth"?¹ It is this apparently radical proposition that is the basis for what Polanyi termed his "post-critical" philosophy, and he looks to St. Augustine for guidance.

II

Going hand-in-hand with its skepticism is the modern rejection of tradition, for submitting to a tradition requires submitting

to an authority that has not been vetted by radical doubt. The early moderns initiated their inquiries by explicitly and categorically rejecting the authority of the Aristotelian and religious traditions. Because those traditions were seen as a hindrance to the pursuit of truth, any reliance on tradition—with its attending submission and belief—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.²

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.”³ Polanyi argues that the modern-day descendants of Descartes and Locke are still pursuing their ideals in the twentieth century, and these ideals manifest 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.”⁴

The attempted rejection of all reliance 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 thus subjected 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 ostensibly cloud the mind and prevent the knower from directly accessing truth. According to Polanyi, this approach to knowing “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.”⁵ The obvious question that arises at this point is whether or not such things as belief and tradition are epistemologically necessary. If they are, then the ideal embraced by modern philosophy is self-contradictory, and it would follow that those who pursue this ideal inevitably find themselves mired in philosophical incoherence. Polanyi recognizes, what might be termed, the epistemic role of tradition; thus, for him the rejection of tradition must be overcome if modern man is to recover his epistemological bearings.

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*.”⁶ 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 faith 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.”⁷ This call for a return to Augustine is a call for a 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.”⁸ Yet, in spite of the obvious progress, there has been a darker side. Writing as a European Jew, Polanyi was all too aware that the benefits produced by modern rationalism were offset by the horrors of the twentieth century. Despite the obvious technological advances, the promises of inevitable progress brought on by the ubiquity of modern rationalism were hollow. Thus, while he is loath to discard all of the gains of modernity, he is also convinced that the moral and political tragedies of the twentieth century clearly reveal the logical consequences of modern rationalism. For him, then, the modern crisis in knowledge has manifested itself in inhumane acts of unspeakable proportions, and the problem must be dealt with at its roots: a new approach to knowledge must be proposed.

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.⁹

Polanyi’s call for a return to Augustine is not so much a call to reject all appeals to reason or to reject the importance of science or other secular pursuits as it is a call to recognize the indispensable role belief plays in all knowing, for the modern bias in favor of rationalism, which insists that all knowledge be either rationally or

empirically demonstrable, produces a discrediting of belief. Thus, such areas as morality, religion, and aesthetics, which are not susceptible to scientific demonstration, are denigrated as subjective opinion. Polanyi is attempting to recover that which was ceded to modern methodology so that the role of belief can once again be recognized as indispensable.

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.¹⁰

For Polanyi, knowing is an art, and any art is learned by practice. Thus, the learning of rules is not the primary manner by which an art is acquired. “Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims, which can serve as a guide to an art only if they can be integrated into the practical knowledge of the art. They cannot replace this knowledge.”¹¹ Practical knowledge precedes the knowledge of rules, for one must possess a degree of practical knowledge in order properly to apply the rules. But if practical knowledge is not learned by the study of explicit rules, then one must acquire it through doing. But how can a person practice an art if he does not yet know how to do so? One must submit to an authority in the manner of an apprentice—we learn by example.

To learn by example is to submit to authority. You follow your master because you trust his manner of doing things even when you cannot analyse and account in detail for its effectiveness. By watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example, the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art, including those which are not explicitly known to the master himself. These hidden rules can be assimilated.

lated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another.¹²

In learning by submitting to the authority of a teacher, the pupil seeks to grasp what he initially does not comprehend. In other words, the student must seek to indwell, through submitting to the master, a new body of knowledge. "In order to share this indwelling, the pupil must presume that a teaching which appears meaningless to start with has in fact a meaning which can be discovered by hitting on the same kind of indwelling as the teacher is practicing. Such an effort is based on accepting the teacher's authority."¹³

But if knowing is an art, and if learning an art requires dwelling in the practices of a master, then it follows that there must exist a tradition by which an art is transmitted, and any attempts categorically and systematically to reject tradition are logically incompatible with knowing. If that is the case, then we must conclude that the ideal of a tradition-free inquiry is simply impossible. As Polanyi puts it, "no human mind can function without accepting authority, custom, and tradition: it must rely on them for the mere use of a language."¹⁴ A child must put his trust in the language-speakers around him and seek to indwell the particulars of the language before he can master it. He does not begin by learning rules or grammar and syntax, for the rules themselves require language in order to be formulated. In the same way, any skill must first be acquired through submission to the authority of a particular tradition, for the skill itself exists primarily in its practice and only secondarily in rules, which are necessarily formulated subsequent to practice. Tradition, then, plays an indispensable role in the knowledge that we acquire, and it would seem that Polanyi is justified in claiming that

it appears that traditionalism, which requires us to believe before we know, and in order that we may know, is based on a deeper insight into the nature of knowledge and of the communication of knowledge than is a scientific rationalism that would permit us to believe only explicit statements based on tangible data and derived from these by a formal inference, open to repeated testing.¹⁵

Tradition, for Polanyi, is not a simple and stable resource that can be accessed in a purely objective fashion. Instead, Polanyi's traditionalism is dynamic on several levels. First, it encourages a certain degree of dissent. The authoritative nature of a tradition does not mean that a tradition cannot be rebelled against or rejected. On the contrary, since the goal of inquiry is knowledge of reality, dissent is permitted, but "even the sharpest dissent still operates by partial submission to an existing consensus."¹⁶ Rebellion is always in reference to some established body of knowledge; therefore, any rebellion is conditioned by the existing tradition against which the rebellion takes place. Second, tradition is dynamic in that we cannot participate in it without changing it. "Traditions are transmitted to us from the past, but they are our own interpretations of the past, at which we have arrived within the context of our own immediate problems."¹⁷ Thus, each generation employs tradition, but the appropriation necessarily entails interpretation and the interpretation is necessarily conducted in light of the concerns, biases, and challenges of the particular generation engaging the tradition. Finally, each person who participates in a tradition contributes to the development of the tradition, itself. Thus, "every new member subscribing to a...tradition adds his own shade of interpretation to it."¹⁸ According to Polanyi, then, tradition is constantly changing while at the same time maintaining its identity.

A tradition requires the presence of a

community committed to its perpetuation. Since, as we have seen, knowing is an art that requires one to enter into a practice by virtue of submission to the authority of a master, and since practices exist in traditions by which they are transmitted, Polanyi concludes that all knowing occurs within this traditional scheme. But, traditions do not exist apart from the communities that embrace and transmit them to subsequent generations. Thus, knowledge is essentially social. But the claim is even stronger, for rather than being merely social, knowledge is communal in the sense that traditions persist only in communities which embrace a particular tradition as an orthodoxy.

Since all knowing rests on a fiduciary framework, belief, as we have seen, precedes knowing. But belief requires an object, and this role is filled by tradition operating within a community committed to its perpetuation. For example, at its most basic, language requires belief. When a child learns a language, he believes that the language-speakers who surround him are not uttering gibberish. The acquisition of skills, as we have seen, requires submission to a master even though the novice does not yet comprehend the meaning of that which he is practicing. Science is no different, for the aspiring scientist must submit himself to the authority of a scientist, and such submission requires belief. "Thus," in Polanyi's words, "to accord validity to science—or to any other of the great domains of the mind—is to express a faith which can be upheld only within a community. We realize here the connexion between Science, Faith and Society."¹⁹ The connection is that science or any other area of knowing, depends on a fiduciary framework in which belief necessarily precedes all knowing. This belief, though, cannot exist apart from a community of believers who sustain the tradition by passing it to the next generation through a process of apprenticeship.

Knowing requires the existence of a society committed to a particular tradition and engaged in passing it on. This is not to say that knowledge is only possible within a homogeneous community. Indeed, a particular society may be comprised of a variety of competing traditions. But the social nature of knowing depends on the existence of social structures each committed to a particular tradition or set of traditions. Of course, it is frequently the case that the adherents of a tradition are not explicitly aware of that to which they are committed, for often the premises of a tradition "lie deeply embedded in the unconscious foundations of practice."²⁰ These premises are tacitly passed to the next generation through education in the practices by which the tradition is constituted.

III

Given this account, which recognizes the fiduciary element necessarily at the heart of all knowing, we are now ready to return to our discussion of the history of western thought and attempt to comprehend that development through the lens of this reconceptualization of knowledge. We must return again to the early modern period, for seeds were sown at that time that did not bear fruit for more than two centuries, and the postmodern alternative is a direct result of that which first emerged with the early moderns.

A major shift occurred in philosophy in the seventeenth century that historians of philosophy sometimes refer to as the "epistemological turn." In short, epistemology, which for earlier thinkers had been important but not primary, was elevated to a place of primacy. The central concern of philosophy became the nature of knowledge: How do I as rational being acquire knowledge, and how can I be certain that that which I believe to be true is, in fact, true? This represented a sea change, for its effect was to force a

suspension of belief in all that could not be justified according to the dictates of the new methodology. Where earlier thinkers simply assumed that knowing was possible, this new approach demanded that knowing be demonstrable. Where pre-modern Augustinian thinkers began with a complex theistic ontology in which God's existence was taken as a given and the basic doctrines of the Christian faith were taken as starting points for philosophical inquiry, modern thinkers refused to take anything by faith. Instead, they attempted to establish an indubitable epistemological foundation upon which all subsequent knowing could be built.

But with the so-called epistemological turn a radically new approach to philosophy was born. Rather than taking the existence of God and the basic doctrines of the Christian faith as foundational ontological principles from which to proceed, these innovative thinkers sought to rid themselves of all dependence on authority, tradition, and belief and rely only upon their individual rational faculties. Thus, where, in the pre-modern approach, a transcendent ontology was the primary starting point for inquiry, in the modern age, the immanent self was tapped to serve that purpose. While it is true that many moderns maintained their theistic beliefs, they did so in a manner quite different from the pre-moderns. That is, rather than simply beginning with a commitment to a theistic ontology, they instead began with a commitment to nothing other than the pursuit of rationally procurable truths. Though in many cases modern philosophers argued (with varying degrees of success) for the existence of God and the truths of the Christian religion, the fundamental orientation had changed. In short, where the pre-modern Augustinian began with transcendent ontology as a starting point for inquiry, the modern began with a necessarily immanent epistemology.

This shift carried manifold implications. Most obvious, perhaps, is a reconfiguration of the relationship between faith and reason. With the pre-modern Augustinian, faith preceded reason and provided a context within which reason could conduct its business. The modern, on the other hand, by putting epistemology first, reversed the relationship between faith and reason so that now reason preceded any form of faith, and if a particular belief could not find rational justification, it was denigrated as irrational. In other words, for the pre-modern Augustinian, faith precedes reason; for the modern rationalist, reason destroys faith.

In making the rational justification of knowledge the foundation for all inquiry, this modern approach necessarily subjected all previously held beliefs to methodological doubt. Traditional beliefs and traditional authorities were discounted in the attempt to purge thought of all that could not meet the stringent standards of the modern methodology. Because doubt was seen as the universal solvent and autonomous reason the universally accessible tool by which knowledge could be reconstituted, the ideal espoused by the moderns was one of impersonal detachment (personal implies irrational subjectivism), universal scope (reason will yield conclusions applicable to all rational beings), and certain conclusions (reason rightly applied will produce indubitable results). The ideals of detachment, universality, and certainty, require that all inquiry be conducted by a universally applicable methodology, which would produce explicit results regardless of the particular person who wielded the method. Any rational person could, indeed, was responsible to, employ his or her rational faculties to the application of the universally accepted methodology. Thus, another feature of this new approach is its epistemological individualism.

Furthermore, a rejection of traditional philosophical forms brought about a rejection of teleology. This is not to say that all moderns join in this rejection, but a general disdain for Aristotelian concepts along with a philosophical approach that did not begin with belief in God (or an Unmoved Mover) as the necessary condition for all subsequent thought, made a robust teleological account of human life difficult to justify. Eventually, a rejection of a theistic ontology as the necessary condition for all-knowing led to a general rejection of any immaterial world, and a purely immanent account of reality led to the affirmation of a closed system by which nature exercises absolute control. Thus, materialism and naturalism came to be embraced, and quite reasonably, some form of mechanistic determinism was soon to follow. The irony is this: by rejecting a philosophy grounded in antecedent belief in a theistic ontology and instead beginning with a purely immanent epistemology, man as a free and rational being was eventually eliminated, for in a purely materialistic and naturalistic world, there is no room for human freedom or dignity. Whether man is controlled by his appetites, his genes, or the physics of matter, he is controlled nonetheless, and those things we hold to be most dear are reduced to illusions, shadows reflecting a false reality.

The modern movement failed in several ways. First, complete detachment is impossible. We participate in that which we strive to know; thus, we cannot extricate ourselves completely from the knowing process. Second, a universal and explicit method fails to account for areas of knowledge that are not susceptible to such a methodology. Thus, such things as morality, religion, and aesthetics—things we as humans care deeply about—are left unaccounted for despite our longing for their meaningful integration into our lives. Third, epistemological individualism is untenable, for knowing necessarily en-

tails a social element. We learn from others, and to remove that element is to create feral creatures, physiologically human but intellectually much less. Fourth, rationalistic methodology, despite its promises, did not secure certain knowledge to which all rational beings universally acceded. Major disagreements remained, and even flourished, among individuals linked by nothing more than the apparently inadequate bonds of rationality. Fifth, as already mentioned, the materialistic and naturalistic conclusions of modernity proved unlivable. That is not to say that many did not remain committed to this view, but inconsistencies continually creep in when, for example, a hard-nosed rationalist speaks of loving his wife or weeps at the loss of a parent or is moved by the music of Bach. Finally, and this is important, the rationalist, who refuses to begin with any commitment or faith and instead seeks to proceed on the basis of reason alone, actually cannot avoid beginning with faith. At the simplest level, he necessarily begins with a faith in his rational faculties. Furthermore, as Polanyi argues, all thinking persons necessarily depend on a tacit commitment to a particular tradition, which includes one's language and one's culture, and even to articulate a rejection of one's tradition requires a dependence on resources provided by that tradition. Thus, at its very heart, a philosophical approach that attempts to make epistemology primary necessarily falls into philosophical as well as existential incoherence.

The response to this inevitable failure of modern philosophy came in the form of an aptly named successor, postmodernism. Recognizing the inadequacies of modernism, the postmodern sought to recover the meaning that had been lost by showing how modernism is a dead-end and offering an alternative that restores human dignity. The key to understanding the progression from modernism to

postmodernism lies first in comprehending the important way postmodernism rejects modernism and second, in the perhaps even more important way that it accepts the premises of modernism. On the one hand, postmoderns reject the modern attempt to secure an indubitable epistemological foundation. There is, for the postmodern, no such foundation, and the attempt to secure such a thing is merely the vanity of a particular individual or society. In rejecting epistemological foundationalism, the postmodern rejects the primacy of epistemology. In place of epistemology, the postmodern returns, in a sense, to a pre-modern approach, for like the pre-modern, the postmodern begins with ontology. But on the other hand, rather than beginning with a specifically theistic ontology, as did the pre-moderns, the postmoderns preserve the immanentized perspective produced by the modernist turn to epistemology.

The ontology, then, of the postmodern is wholly immanentized. Such an ontology, like the modernist epistemology, begins with the human being and attempts to forge meaning from that finite starting point. Thus, rather than beginning with God, the postmodern begins with man. Because postmodern ontology is purely immanent, there is no universal that transcends human existence by which the particularities can be arranged. Simply put, man finds himself completely embedded within a particular culture, language, religion, and historical moment. These particularities serve to constitute man's reasoning capabilities; thus, what he is and what he thinks are the products of the situation into which he has been born. For the postmodern, there is no essential human nature. Man's essence is indeterminate; it is the product of his particular situation and his freely chosen acts. Thus, there is no teleology, for such a concept requires an essential nature. The result is epistemological subjectivism and moral

relativism.

Since, like the pre-modern, the postmodern begins with ontology, he again puts belief prior to reason, but this belief is now quite different than that exercised by the pre-modern Augustinian Christian. It is, if you will excuse the ugly phrase, a skeptical belief. The skepticism born of the modern period set the stage for the rejection of God along with any beliefs that could not be demonstrated by the strict methodology of modernity. But while the postmodern turned away from the methodology and the aspirations of modernity, he still clung to the skeptical disposition born of that era. And with belief in God firmly discredited, and with the ensuing particularism that emerged in a world without a universal and transcendent referent, the ideal of truth fell to the skeptic's ax just as the idea of God had fallen in an earlier time.

We see the marked difference between the pre-modern Augustinian and the postmodern nihilist: while both reject the primacy of epistemology and begin with ontology, the ontology of the pre-modern Augustinian is explicitly theistic and is embraced with a belief born of faith and hope. On the other hand, the ontology of the postmodern is wholly immanent and is accepted with an ironic shrug. The pre-modern virtues of faith and hope are replaced with the twin vices of complacency and pride. Complacency is manifested when man accepts his immanentized lot without wondering if there might be more to human existence than his premises allow, and pride emerges when an individual concludes that he is completely free to make of himself what he wills. In a final violent twist, the postmodern man deifies himself, for since his ontology begins with himself, he does, in fact, begin with a theistic ontology but one that is wholly immanent—it is the worship of the self.

IV

This brings us back to Michael Polanyi and to St. Augustine. Polanyi's post-critical philosophy has some things in common with postmodernism, namely, its resounding rejection of the modernist project. Epistemology cannot sustain itself as the first philosophy. In addition, Polanyi recognizes the indispensable role played by tradition. The particular situation into which each person is born and subsequently inculcated does matter and cannot simply be set aside as the moderns believed. But Polanyi's views differ at crucial points with the postmodernist. He is a realist who believes that there exists an independent reality with which we strive to make contact.²¹ It is not a socially constructed reality; although, our understanding of it will be shaded by the particularities of our situation and the fallibility of our nature.

Polanyi insists that belief precedes understanding in the same way that Augustine did. Polanyi's is not the "skeptical belief" of the postmoderns that produces complacency and pride; rather, it is the open belief born of commitment to ideals that cannot be scientifically verified but

are true nonetheless. Polanyi rejects the materialistic reductionism of both the moderns and the postmoderns, and he recognizes the teleological structure of all of life. He affirms that humans ought to pursue transcendent ideals; thus, that which we can do is limited by the responsibility to do as we ought. Polanyi's affirmations, then, make it possible once again to speak meaningfully of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Thus, by looking back to St. Augustine and recovering the insight that belief precedes understanding, Polanyi provides us with a viable third alternative to the dilemma posed between modernism and postmodernism. This third way once again opens the door to meaningful human existence by recognizing the necessity for belief at the heart of all knowing and by breaking out of the immanent constraints to which the moderns and the postmoderns have succumbed. This third alternative recognizes the dead end of modernity along with its postmodern successor and embraces an approach to knowing that overcomes this lengthy digression by recovering and building upon the wisdom of one of the greatest of pre-modern thinkers.²²

1. *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, 1958), 286. 2. "The Stability of Beliefs," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 3.11 (1952): 217. 3. *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago, 1964), 75. "Throughout the formative centuries of modern science, the rejection of authority was its battle-cry" (*Knowing and Being*, ed. Marjorie Grene [London, 1969], 65). 4. *Ibid.*, 76. 5. *Personal Knowledge*, 286. 6. *Ibid.*, 266. Polanyi translates the Latin: "Unless ye believe, ye shall not understand." At other points Polanyi employs a similar Latin phrase, *fides quaerens intellectum*, translated: to believe in order to know. Cf. *Science, Faith and Society*, 15, 45; *The Tacit Dimension*, 61. 7. *Ibid.*, 266. Cf. "Faith and Reason," *The Journal of Religion* 41.4 (1961): 237-9. 8. *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago, 1966), 56. 9. "Faith and Reason," 238-9. 10. *Personal Knowledge*, 266. 11. *Ibid.*, 50. Cf. *Ibid.*, 31. 12. *Ibid.*, 53. Polanyi notes that the word "uncritically" is more precisely rendered "a-critically." *Ibid.*, 264 n.2.

13. *The Tacit Dimension*, 61. 14. *Ibid.*, 41. 15. *Ibid.*, 61-2. 16. *Personal Knowledge*, 208. Cf., *Science, Faith and Society*, 69. 17. *Ibid.*, 160. 18. *Science, Faith and Society*, 72. 19. *Ibid.*, 73. Cf., *Ibid.*, 64, 81. 20. *Ibid.*, 76. 21. "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" (*Knowing and Being*, 133). 22. Polanyi is not the only twentieth-century thinker to seek this alternative path. In many respects, such thinkers as Alasdair MacIntyre and Eric Voegelin embark on the same journey.