Achieving Maturity: Gadamer, Polanyi, and Coming to Age

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In what follows I would like to share with you a passage from Hans-Georg Gadamer that shows that he possesses a penetrating perspective regarding the pedagogical transformation that was the theme for the 2018 meeting of our Society. In doing so I will, in addition, demonstrate that in his portrayal of "the educated mind" Michael Polanyi provides both a refinement and an extension of what Gadamer sets forth in this passage. By employing Gadamer's words as a springboard, and then seizing upon Polanyi's vital insights into the coming to be of the mature mind, we will make significant progress in better understanding the phenomenon of formation that is of primary concern to this year's Program Committee.

Let us begin by hearing from Gadamer:

> That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us—*and not just what is clearly grounded*—always has power over our attitudes and behavior. All education depends on this, and even though, in the case of education, the educator loses his function when his charge comes to age and sets his own insight and decisions in the place of the authority of the educator, becoming mature does not mean that a person becomes his own master in the sense that he is freed from all tradition. The real force of morals, for example, is based on tradition. They are freely taken over *but by no means created by a free insight or grounded on reasons*. This is precisely what we call tradition: the ground of their validity.[1]

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We are startled here by so many forthright and, for some of us, controversial assertions. Let us take a moment to explore their meaning.

Gadamer is bringing to our attention the fact that our thinking, especially what we take to be real, morally incumbent, or otherwise significant, is at least to a considerable degree determined by tradition and custom. What we understand as authoritative—and as different as our various views may be, each of us experiences and is inclined to yield to authority—is handed down to us. In all but the most exceptional cases we accept this heritage willingly. And even when the decision is difficult, we must wonder what role tradition and custom is playing. Yet, the authority, says Gadamer, is "nameless." That is, we simply come to have it and are apt during the myriad decisions and actions of our lives not even to be aware that it is there, exercising its ubiquitous influence.

Clearly, while most of us agree most of the time (just imagine what it would be like if we did not!), there are moments of conflict. Sometimes the conflict is deeply rooted. The existence of such conflict compels us to infer that the nameless authority under which we see and act might have been different than it is. What accounts for the fact that Pierre and Suzanne, *with full integrity*, vehemently object to our own conscientious acts? Gadamer offers three vital clues: "our finite historical being," "handed down to us," and "not just what is clearly grounded." The first of these phrases is a reminder of the contingency of our lives: each of us finds him or herself emerging in and shaped by circumstances that could just as well have been different from what they are. The second and third phrases instruct us that the process of shaping is largely tacit; the past and what is received from it is the default, and the most important influences achieve and maintain their authority precisely because they are taken for granted. In this connection we learn much from Norman Malcolm's penetrating observations regarding the role of "groundless belief."[2] Drawing extensively on Wittgenstein, Malcolm notes "how much mere acceptance, on the basis of no evidence, shapes our lives."[3]

How interesting it is, then, that Gadamer goes on to assert that education not only is a function of this very dynamic, but also that it would be

impossible without it. Evidently, we are to understand that were we to attempt in our educational endeavors to make our activity fully explicit or (in obedience to a fuzzy notion of respect for the learner) to strive to ensure that the young person is focally aware of (and perhaps granted veto power over?) the forces of formation, the process would fail, much as would the centipede that, instead of fluently crawling along, elected to pay attention to each of its feet. Indeed, Gadamer suggests that this aspiration for education is incoherent. The very meaning of education, after all, is "authority."

But the interval of formation via systematic education comes to an end. Gadamer observes, and in this connection there is a great deal to gain from Luigi Giussani,[4] the moment arrives when "the educator loses his function [because] his charge comes to age and sets his own insight and decisions in the place of the authority of the educator … " What is this age? Many are shocked when Giussani, in all seriousness, says 20 years.

Perhaps less controversial is the unavoidable implication of Gadamer's statement that it can be only in a loose sense that the educator "loses his function." This is because the success of the educator is shown in his or her (or, more precisely, the tradition's) enduring influence within the mind and actions of the former charge. Gadamer recognizes this essential aspect of education when he notes that maturity "does not mean that a person becomes his own master in the sense that he is freed from all tradition." In fact, the sure sign of genuine education is that the newly formed individual becomes in turn the vehicle of the informing tradition and custom. Excellence in the educational process is shown when the newly independent person elects to educate his or her own young in the very manner through which, in contrast with countless alternative possibilities, he or she came to age.

An important further implication of the passage from Gadamer is that "autonomous self-determination," if taken literally, is an illusion. While of course a person may be more or less free of external influence, to suggest that one can altogether be so is nonsensical. Indeed, freedom (including whatever might be meant by "self-determination") consists of quite the opposite, viz., it is the product of a process of *enablement*, a capacity that, to the extent it exists,

is the primary outcome of a wise education.

Towards the close of the passage, Gadamer states, "The real force of morals … is based on tradition." Here we are sharply reminded of C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, and are well advised to attend to its wisdom. If an individual is to act morally, he or she must be willing *and able* to live in light of principle. How is this possible? What enables us to do so?[5] Lewis understands that the answer is intimately tied to a process of formation that is fairly characterized as "education."

Of particular note in Gadamer's account is that the question of justification does not arise. And, if it did, one suspects that justification would be circular. Tradition and custom provide (and only they can provide) the authority for their own continuity and preservation.

Gadamer's passage thus poses important questions. Is the vision of education outlined there, understood either empirically or normatively, acceptable? More fundamentally, is this question even properly posed? Might circularity in justification (above all, in relation to education), far from constituting a vice, be inescapable, and hence the recognition of its necessity a virtue? In clarifying and extending what Gadamer has so far said there is no more fruitful direction in which to turn than toward the work of Michael Polanyi.

What has Polanyi to say about *the educated mind*? In a section of his *magnum opus*, *Personal Knowledge*, which bears that very title, he states:

> We are clearly aware of the extent and special character of our knowledge [gained through education], even though focally aware of hardly any of its innumerable items. Of these particulars we are aware only in terms of our mastery of the subject of which they form part. This sense of mastery is similar in kind to the inarticulate knowledge of knowing one's way about a complex topography.[6]

Polanyi then adds, "Consciousness of our education resides ultimately … in our conceptual powers … Education is *latent* knowledge, of which we are aware subsidiarily in our sense of intellectual power based on this knowl-

edge."[7] Centrally important to Polanyi's account is that "[t]he power of our conceptions lies in identifying new instances of certain things we know."[8] In this connection, he employs the concept "anticipations." To possess a concept, indeed to know, is to anticipate that future encounters with the world will conform to a certain pattern: "our conceptual framework … enables us to see ever new objects as such."[9] We have here the phenomenon of "seeing as," "seeing in terms of," or, more fundamentally, "seeing with," whose examination has a rich history in the proceedings of this Society. You will in addition have noted the important reference in Polanyi's account to the concept of "enablement," a matter which will prove important indeed.

But the capacity to assimilate experience in accordance with our conceptual framework is only one of two fundamental features of the educated mind. The other is "our capacity ever to re-adapt [our anticipations] to novel and unprecedented situations.[10]" In a later clarification Polanyi states, "in all our thoughts—whether tacit or articulate—we rely jointly on two faculties, namely (1) on the power of our conceptual framework … to assimilate new experience and (2) on our capacity to adapt this framework in the very act of applying it, so that it may increase its hold on reality."[11] In this sense, "youth and maturity co-exist,"[12] the former in a stream of newly-modified conceptions, the latter in the powerful impact of hard-earned experience on how we understand the world in the emerging moment. Moreover, to possess a conceptual framework and the associated capacities is to experience a sense of "intellectual control." This in turn becomes the basis for growing personal confidence and increased self-reliance, vital and necessary outcomes of any endeavor aspiring to count as "democratic education," a conviction central to the thought of two early giants of our discipline and this Society, Foster McMurray and Harry Broudy.[13]

Polanyi's conception of the educated mind deepens and extends on a number of fronts Gadamer's fertile account of education as human formation. To see how this is the case, let us further clarify Polanyi's vision in connection with the concept of apprenticeship, his notion of "calling," and what he refers to as "the paradox of self-set standards."[14]

Before turning full-time to philosophy in 1948, Polanyi was a world-class chemist who had authored more than 200 scientific papers. In this capacity he was renowned for his skill in mentoring young research scientists, two of whom (as well as his own son) won the Nobel Prize. As a result, then, of both his own emergence as a master in a guild and his decades-long role as a teacher of tradition, Polanyi developed profound insight into education as formation. Setting the stage for our understanding of the educational enterprise, he declares, "Any effort made to understand something must be sustained by the belief that there is something there that can be understood."[15] In elaboration, he adds:

> Its effort to learn to speak is prompted in the child by the conviction that speech means something. Guided by its love and trust of its guardians, it perceives the light of reason in their eyes, voices, and bearing and feels instinctively attracted towards the source of this light. It is impelled to imitate—and to understand better as it imitates further—these expressive actions of its adult guides.[16]

This is for Polanyi the model for apprenticeship. Note here the underlying "conviction" on the part of the learner. This conviction, which is a necessary condition for the learning that follows, is not itself taught but instead seemingly exists by default and is a presupposition of subsequent education, a process that is properly referred to as "initiation." Formation, however, takes time, and ongoing preservation of the original conviction becomes a central concern of the wise educator. If, for example, moral truth and the corresponding reality are eventually to be understood, then the primary educational requirement is to provide the enabling conditions under which belief in them is possible.

Note, too, the vital role played in the formation of the young by authority, belief, and trust. In becoming a journeyman member of a guild—and "guild" can as readily apply to a moral community as it does here to science—the beginning consists of openness and surrender. This represents an instance of the enablement mentioned above. A primary function of the educator is to preserve that enablement (if Giussani is correct, until age 20). Anything

that undermines the capacity for faith and trust—physical abuse or severe deprivation of the young, perhaps, or premature exposure to skepticism or doubt—constitutes a toxic impediment to realization of our educational objective. This is because apprenticeship is the time for transmission and establishment of *premises*, which is a synonym for Malcolm's "groundless beliefs." Interference with this process is crippling, whether the envisioned outcome is a master bricklayer, a musician, a scientist, or a reliable member of a moral community (the "man" referred to by Lewis in "The Abolition of Man"). We have here in keener detail the "tak[ing] over" (i.e., the adoption) of morals noted by Gadamer. Polanyi and he are equally forthright in viewing this as the operation of tradition.

During apprenticeship a shaping is taking place, a shaping manifested in what the resulting individual understands to be possible, real, and worthwhile. This is an education that is primarily preoccupied with the creation of *horizons*.[17] It aims to produce a sort of person. In other words, it is character formation.

Polanyi represents a long and durable tradition (Plato and Aristotle come to mind, as do Rousseau and Dewey) animated by the conviction that when it comes to the proper development of human beings there are measures that can and ought to be taken to establish appropriate commitments. In response to the recommendation of such measures, one might protest that to be committed is a natural posture, and that we therefore do not need to establish commitment but instead should be concerned only with eliminating factors that impede or destroy it. In response Polanyi would point out that while commitment to *some* principle or ideal may be natural and inevitable, commitment to *any particular* principle or ideal is not. The latter is the consequence of rearing in a distinct setting. If, then, we are committed to a particular principle or ideal, in the name of consistency (not to mention out of respect for the principle or ideal itself), it is incumbent for us to establish that setting.

As indicated above, Polanyi emphasizes that the process of shaping horizons is an act of initiation into a tradition. In speaking of his own professional life, Polanyi states that "science can exist and continue to exist only

because its premises can be embodied in a tradition which can be held in common by a community."[18] He adds, there is "a spiritual reality embodied in tradition and transcending it. It expresses a belief in this superior reality and offers devotion to its service."[19] Relying upon his intimate knowledge of science, Polanyi pierces to the heart of the pedagogical problem when he states, "members admitted to a community at birth cannot be given a free choice of their premises; they have to be educated in some terms or other, without consultation of any preference of their own."[20] Making much the same point is Alasdair MacIntyre who, with refreshing candor, states:

> Morality … is in a very important way educative of desire. And the desires that people bring to their education are ones which they are going to have to modify, or even abandon, if they are to acquire the intellectual and moral virtues. If we treat the students' desires as given, the students' original goals as given, we are in effect abdicating from the task of educating them into the intellectual and moral virtues.[21]

MacIntyre, it should be noted, is here referring to undergraduates, thereby suggesting that Giussani's conception of the duration of the formative years may not be inordinate after all.

It is important to emphasize, for it is easy to misunderstand Polanyi at this point, that the product of this education in the reality and authority of higher things is not restriction or confinement but instead quite the opposite. This is because "[m]entally, we are called into being by accepting an idiom of thought."[22] In our dedication to the ideal and in acceptance of responsibility to it we find the sole conditions under which we become what we ought to be. In this connection Polanyi speaks of dedication "to the service of a transcendent reality"[23] and "surrender to the service of impersonal principles."[24] In such service one is free.[25]

As we look more closely at what Polanyi means by surrender, we encounter a striking depth of psychological analysis. Polanyi states that "all knowledge is based on the interiorisation of certain elements, for the purpose

of attending to something we explicitly know. It is not by attending to the particulars of the whole, but by dwelling in them that we comprehend their joint meaning."[26] For example, we recognize our friend in a crowd by surrendering to, which is to say dwelling in or interiorizing, the shape of forehead, nose, chin, eyes, etc. that we see and thereby discovering and focusing on, and then recognizing, her face. The indwelling is done tacitly and is not the object of explicit attention. Indeed, were we to focus on the details, we would be unable to see the whole. The result of the indwelling is an object that *is* explicitly seen and constitutes the "joint meaning" of the implicit clues. Now, Polanyi applies the same model of knowing to both scientific theories and moral teachings. In the case of the former, the scientist, having been introduced into and then mastering a tradition of inquiry, tacitly employs its categories, concepts, and presuppositions as a lens through which to discover and understand the world. In Polanyi's terms: "To apply a theory for understanding nature is to interiorise it. We attend then from the theory to things interpreted in its light."[27] But to live in light of moral teachings is also an instance of interiorization. Through indwelling, "we identify ourselves with the teachings in question for judging the actions of men, including our own."[28] This is an act of *trust*. The result is what we call character, an outcome which constitutes the central rationale for moral education and liberal studies generally.

Inevitably, Polanyi's program of educational formation will meet with objections concerning the legitimacy of *his* principles and ideals. Even if we grant that Polanyi (or Gadamer, Giussani, or MacIntyre) is accurate descriptively in regard to education as formation, on what basis does he justify his envisioned ends as opposed to those that might be conceived by someone else? It is here that his concept of "calling" is relevant and we encounter the genius of Polanyi's position, taken as a whole.

At a critical juncture in *Personal Knowledge* Polanyi states: "'*I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.*' This sentence, summarizing my fiduciary programme, conveys an ultimate belief which I find myself holding. Its assertion must therefore prove consistent with its content by practising what it authorizes."[29] Polanyi then articulates the

fundamental paradox that defines the balance of mind that is his personal as well as pedagogical objective. He states: "This is indeed true. For in uttering this sentence I both say that I must commit myself by thought and speech, and do so at the same time. Any inquiry into our ultimate beliefs can be consistent only if it presupposes its own conclusions. It must be intentionally circular."[30] The capacity to grasp and appreciate "the fundamental paradox" defines the very core of the balance sought and recommended by Polanyi. It is a frame of mind whose existence requires a constant renewal of commitment. And, notably, it is nurtured by sustained faith. Making the paradox possible as well as necessary is the marked absence in this account of reference to anything impersonally objective, and of any desire for it. To have achieved balance of mind is a cleansing.

Polanyi regards himself as representative of a generic human possibility. This possibility takes the form of compelling oneself "forcibly to act as he believes he must."[31] Down this path lie the highest conceivable rewards. But how is it that one comes to believe in this way? What are the grounds for such belief? Responding to the incontrovertible fact that each of us emerges out of a set of particular circumstances that unavoidably and in great measure shape what we think and who we are, Polanyi states that "I accept these accidents of personal existence as the concrete opportunities for exercising our personal responsibility. *This acceptance is the sense of my calling*."[32] A calling, then, is a consequence of decision by way of acceptance: Finding oneself in this time and place, possessing this body, this experience, and these understandings, the individual recognizes a responsibility and opts to accept what it entails. He or she elects to pursue the ideal. Polanyi offers us the spectacle of the individual, necessarily rooted in the particularity and contingency of time and place reaching out in an act of passionate commitment to something that is universal and transcendent. Because nothing is ensured, this is an act of faith, a trusting that in seeking we will in fact receive. Making this possible is the individual's acquaintance with the ideal, his or her capacity to discern in it a ground for obligation, and the willingness and ability to act in accordance with that obligation. In doing so, one "*submits* to a higher power."[33] We thus

have "the framework of commitment, in which the personal and the universal mutually require each other. Here the personal comes into existence by asserting universal intent, and the universal is constituted by being accepted as the impersonal term of the personal commitment."[34] By surrendering to the standards of the enterprise—the enterprise (or community) may be science, the law, the arts, religious life, or any other traditional practice—we escape the limitations of particularity and subjectivity. We are, however, in the debt of those limitations, for they constitute the "ideal-blind medium" that in its unyieldingness "determines [our] calling."[35] These limitations are the necessary condition for that which permits us to glimpse what is higher, for exposure to "the family of things which exist only for those committed to them."[36]

From this account it is clear that Polanyi's vision of human calling depends on the presence to the mind of standards to which one may surrender. For Polanyi such surrender is the portal to the life that we are meant to live. Bringing such standards into the lives of the young, and arranging for their believability, is the cardinal role of the educator. None of this, however, is guaranteed. As C. S. Lewis observes, "It is in Man's power to treat himself as a mere 'natural object' and…if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be…."[37] In these disturbing words Lewis is reminding us that the pedagogical chain that makes possible the most important things may be broken.

In Polanyi, then, we find a rich and intriguing expansion of Gadamer's portrayal of education as the product and expression of tradition as well as the conception of education as formation. This is unsurprising, for, at heart, Gadamer and Polanyi are preoccupied with the same phenomenon, namely, coming to age, which refers not only to *what* we believe but also *how* we do so and on what basis. What Gadamer emphasizes, and Polanyi fruitfully elaborates, is the indispensable role played in this process by the "nameless" which, under wise tutelage, is tacitly yet authoritatively passed down to and through each of us. There are grounds here for gratitude, and also for humility, aspiration, and awe.

1 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second, Revised Edition (New York: Continuum, 2003 [originally published in 1960]), 280-281. Emphasis added.
2 Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 92-103.
3 Malcolm cites Wittgenstein from *On Certainty* (160): "The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes *after* belief."
4 Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001 [originally published in Italian in 1995]).
5 A rich source of insight on this question, and surely a fount for Lewis's reflections, is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103-1104. In the introduction to his translation of the book, Joe Sachs offers invaluable insight into Aristotelian habituation as a process of enablement. See, also, *1 Corinthians* 13:11.
6 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974 [originally published in 1958]), 102-104, cf. 124 and 317.
7 Ibid. 103.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid. 317.
12 The phrase is taken from the 2018 Philosophy of Education Society Conference Program Committee's call for papers.
13 The two were colleagues at the University of Illinois from the 1950s through the mid-1970s. While Broudy published widely and was extremely well known (notably, even beyond the world of philosophy of education), McMurray wrote comparatively little. His *magnum opus*, "Philosophy of Public Education," was never published. It can, however, be accessed at ERIC (ED 442 681). See, especially, Chapter 8, "The Curriculum: Confidence and Tension." For a guided introduction to McMurray and a bibliography of his writings, see Jon Fennell, "Foster McMurray's Philosophy of Public Education," *Educational Studies* 40, no. 2 (2006): 152-163. For a treatment of Broudy, see Jon Fennell, "Polanyi and the Secular Age: The Promise of Broudy's 'Allusionary Store'," *Philosophy of Education 2016*, ed. Natasha Levinson (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2018): 38-46.
14 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* 65, 321-324; 104; cf. 63, 95, and 315.
15 Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964 [originally published in 1946]), 44.
16 Ibid.
17 "Horizons" here is used in the sense made prominent by Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." See Allan Bloom's penetrating discussion of the concept on pages 351 and 404 of the interpretative essay that accompanies his translation of the dialogue.
18 Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society,* 56.
19 Ibid., 57.

20 Ibid., 72.
21 MacIntyre is quoted by Stanley Hauerwas in *The State of the University* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 127-128, n. 14.
22 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* 376.
23 Polanyi, "Foundations of Academic Freedom," in *The Logic of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 49.
24 Ibid., 53.
25 It is the service to the ideal, not its full achievement, which is important. Indeed, full realization of ideals is not to be expected. The grandeur of human existence consists of our passionate commitment to them nevertheless. See Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 245.
26 Polanyi, "Science and Religion," *Philosophy Today* 7, no. 1 (1963), 7-8. "Dwelling in" the particulars is as opposed to "attending to" them.
27 Polanyi, "Science and Religion," 8.
28 Ibid.
29 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 299.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 315. This is followed by, "He can do no more, and he would evade his calling by doing less."
32 Ibid., 322.
33 Ibid., 323.
34 Ibid., 308.
35 Ibid., 334. Cf. 323: "I shall submit to this fact as defining the conditions within which I am called upon to exercise my responsibility." This is our "starting-point in space and time."
36 Ibid., 380.
37 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 72.