The Consciousness of Death: An Essay on
Polanyi’s Understanding of Human Nature

Hüseyin Özel
Department of Economics
Hacettepe University, 06532
Beytepe, Ankara
TURKEY
ozel@hacettepe.edu.tr

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt at exploring the role played by the idea of the inevitability of death. The starting point of the paper is the assumption that the “sublimation” process emanating from the denial of death as a reality involves the creation of cultural symbols supposedly having the power to transcend death, and thereby giving human beings “immortality.” The “morbid” or “neurotic” character of such a process is emphasized, and it is argued that this process leads eventually to the denial not only of death, but also of the individuality and sociality of human beings, and therefore to a “dehumanized” state in which the basic characteristics of the “human condition” are violated. Following Polanyi, the paper also argues that any attempt to escape from this “morbid” state must start from the recognition of, and resignation to, the reality of these three facts, namely death, individuality, and sociality. Only by doing so, it is argued, can we assert our own “agency.”

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“The nature of finite things as such is to have the seed of passing away as their essential being: the hour of their birth is the hour of their death.”

G. W. F. Hegel

**Introduction**

When finishing *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi mentions the three facts that shaped the consciousness of Western man: the knowledge of death, the knowledge of freedom, and the knowledge of society. According to him, the recognition of the first fact comes with the Old Testament story, the second with the Christian idea of “the uniqueness of individual”, and the last one, which is the constitutive element of modern man’s consciousness, with the emergence of an industrial society (Polanyi 1944: 258A). In fact, it can be argued that *The Great Transformation* as a whole shows, by examining the phases of the market society from the nineteenth century through the 1930s, that these three facts are closely related to each other, to the degree that they together constitute the essential characteristics of the “human condition,” and that market society, which rests on an institutional organization that results in the denial of these three characteristics, actually violates the “humanity” of individuals for it leads to a “dehumanization” process (Özel 1997). The only measure that could be taken against such “annihilation,” according to Polanyi, is to resign the reality of these facts and to try to form a new social organization in which human beings can reclaim their “humanity.”

The present paper takes Polanyi’s remarks on the reality of death, individuality, and sociality as the starting point, and rests on the conviction that an understanding of human beings on the basis of these three “facts” usefully define an analytical framework that illuminates an important aspect of the human existence. The main focus of the paper will be some possible connections between the idea of the inevitability of death and the remaining two attributes of a human being, namely being an individual and a social being at the same time. The conceptual framework adopted in this paper draws heavily on a notion of human
nature or human “essence” that lies within the Aristotelian tradition, and argues that the essence of man refers to the inherent developmental potentials that a human being has. Such a notion of human essence defining the “species being”, to use Marx’s term, is also believed to be the essential notion underlying the basic argument of *The Great Transformation*. In the paper, therefore, such a notion is elaborated by considering firstly the psychoanalytical approach, for the idea of death and its denial necessarily has some psychological implications, and secondly this philosophical tradition emphasizing the realization of human essence within the “livelihood” of human beings, and the connections between these two traditions are sought. However, since such an endeavor also requires a consideration of the creation of “fictitious commodities,” and its result, “dehumanization” through the “alienation” and “fetishism” processes, a brief discussion of these themes and their relations to consciousness of death are also explored. The basic argument of the paper is the same with that of the *Great Transformation*: the acceptance of, and resignation to, the reality of death, individuality, and sociality, would give human beings an opportunity to realize their own potentials and to reclaim the “agency” that defines their humanity.

1. The “Human Condition”: Death, Individuality, and Sociality

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1987: 18), who examined attitudes towards death by people, among whom the dying patients constituted a majority, reports that when individuals are asked what they are afraid of when they think of their own dying, most of them say that they are afraid of separation from their loved ones, pain, suffering, and some unfinished business. However, for her, these constitute only a small part of the fear of death; the most significant part, like an iceberg, lies under water. That is to say, many things we associate with the fear of death are repressed and unconscious, and it is this part we have to understand most. According to Kübler-Ross, it is very hard for one to conceive one’s own death. When forced to think of it,
people usually imagine themselves being killed; something or somebody coming and destroying them. This, according to her, is important in understanding the patients with cancer; even if it has been diagnosed early, they still associate their malignancy with a catastrophic, destructive force and for this reason they feel a sense of impotency and hopelessness (Kübler-Ross, 1987: 19; also Glaser and Strauss 1965). According to Kübler-Ross, if patients could realize that such an association is an irrational one, and that what happens to them is not some kind of punishment for their mistakes or “sins,” such a process would be easier to bear. However, it can also be argued that such an attitude is not limited to the dying patient, but is a permanent aspect the human condition as a whole; human beings, even if they know that sooner or later they are going to die, deny the reality of death by repressing it into the unconscious. In this regard, a whole life activity, even a whole civilization, could be described as a constant struggle between two opposing forces: namely, between the “life instinct” \( (Eros) \) and the “death instinct” \( (Thanatos) \) (Freud 1961; also Marcuse 1955). According to this approach, the level of “civilization” can be characterized by a “sublimation” process; that is, the attempt of the repressed unconscious to project itself onto the external world, as part of its struggle to cope with the inevitability of death. In other words, human culture could be understood as a “set of projections of the repressed unconscious” (Brown 1959: 154). In this conception, a homology between the stages of social evolution and the development of the individual personality is assumed; as the civilization develops and becomes more complex, an increased degree of repression will occur (Giddens 1984: 239-40). Such a position, of course, asserts that a whole human existence and thus culture and history all have a “neurotic” character. The struggle of the \( Eros \), against the \( Thanatos \) in the form of the creation of culture, which is supposed to transcend death, actually mirrors the basic contradiction between the individuality and the sociality of the person. Even if a person is above all an individual who seeks immortality by “making a difference” in the
state of affairs, such a project must necessarily be carried out within a social setting, for culture is a social product.

Such an interpretation of human history (e.g. Brown 1959; Becker 1973, 1975) informed by the psychoanalytical tradition that takes the notion of repression as its basis. The essence of repression lies in the fact that human beings refuse to recognize the realities of their nature, among which death lies in the first place (Brown 1959: 4). In this respect, what a human being does in this “sublimation” process characterizes an Oedipal “causa sui” project whose essence lies in one’s attempt “to become one’s own father,” which represents one’s way of achieving immortality through stamping one’s imprint into the world (Brown 1959: 127-28). That is to say, the process of sublimation can be understood as the reclaiming of one’s own individuality, for this reclamation is essentially one’s unique contribution to the world, one’s way of conferring “meaning” to one’s life by expanding into “heroic” dimensions. Even if this is basically an individual act, it could also be generalized to the whole of humanity; culture, itself being a social product, is nothing but an aggregate process of sublimation. Such an understanding is necessary in order to explore the contradictions of the human condition.

In order to explain this sublimation process, one should consider the two related attributes of human beings characterizing two forms of contradictions. The first contradiction is between the body and the “spirit” (or the mind), and the second is between individuality and sociality, as the two characteristics of human beings. Both of these contradictions are actually manifestations of the basic contradiction of the human realm: the tension between death and life. In the first case, what Brown’s statement “man acquires a soul, but remains only a body,” (1959: 128) or Becker’s statement that we are simultaneously “worms and gods,” or “gods with anuses” (1973: 51) refers to is a basic fact that while the spirit (or the mind) is immortal, or thinks itself to be immortal, the body is not. This “existential contradiction” takes its roots
in the fact that “life is predicated upon nature, yet is not of nature and is set off against it. Human beings emerge from the ‘nothingness’ of inorganic nature and disappear back into that alien state of the inorganic” (Giddens 1984: 193). At the heart of this “neurotic” state of the human existence is the fact that the human mind, or the self, must live with the thought that it is “imprisoned” within a body that, being part of nature, is mortal, decaying and disintegrating. The basic struggle of the self is to transcend death, to achieve immortality, even unconsciously, because, “what man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction with insignificance” (Becker 1975: 4). For this reason, man tries to form cultural symbols that are not to age, decay, disintegrate, or be destroyed, thereby presenting himself with means to transcend his own death so that his life becomes meaningful (Becker 1973; Brown 1959: 101). In this sense, cultural symbols that could sustain “heroics” can be seen as embodiments of the attempt of the self to affirm and reclaim itself in the society; that is, culture gives man the opportunity to create “an alter-organism which is more durable and powerful than the one nature endowed him with” (Becker 1975: 3). This in turn will confer meaning to his life:

Man transcends death not only by continuing to feed his appetites, but especially by finding a meaning for his life, some kind of larger scheme into which he fits: he may believe he has fulfilled God’s purpose, or done his duty to his ancestors or family, or achieved something which has enriched mankind. This is how man assures the expansive meaning of his life in the face of the real limitations of his body; the “immortal self” can take very spiritual forms, and spirituality is not a simple reflex of hunger and fear. (Becker 1975: 3)

This cultural sublimation process, or the *causa sui* project, can be defined as “the use made of bodily energy by a soul which sets itself apart from the body” (Brown 1959: 157), and is caused by man’s refusal of his death, by his being “an animal that cannot die” (Brown 1959: 284). Another attribute of humans that becomes important within this sublimation process is that they are both individuals and social beings at the same. The connection between this attribute and their being a self and a body at the same time is fairly obvious: the mind always considers itself as an individual; it seeks to expand itself by making a difference
in the world, however small, by affirming and realizing its own individuality. In fact, the entire Freudian psychoanalytical theory seeks to explain the basic tensions between this Oedipal project, namely, this individuation and self-realization, and the socialization processes, from the infant to the adult life of the person. These tensions characterize the process of breakdown of the “dialectical unity between union and separateness, between species and the individual, between interdependence and independence between life and death” (Brown 1959: 113). Here, according to Brown, “the principle of unification or interdependence sustains the immortal life of the species and the mortal life of the individual; the principle of separation or independence gives the individual his individuality and ensures his death” (1959: 105). And this reveals the “morbid” character of human existence:

The death instinct is the core of the human neurosis. It begins with the human infant’s incapacity to accept separation from the mother, that separation which confers individual life on all living organisms and which in all living organisms at the same time leads to death…

This incapacity to die, ironically but inevitably, throws mankind out of the actuality of living, which for all normal animals is at the same time dying; the result is denial of life (repression). The incapacity to accept death turns the death instinct into its distinctively human and distinctively morbid form. (Brown 1959: 284)

It should be born in mind that this process, Brown emphasizes, is a contradictory one: “If death gives life individuality and if man is the organism which represses death, then man is the organism which represses his own individuality” (1959: 105). Such a repression in turn leads to attempts of human beings to change both themselves and the world in which they live. In short, this repression manifests itself in “giving man a history and subordinating the life of the individual to the historical quest of the species. History is made not by individuals but by groups; and the cliche-mongers repeat ad nauseam that man is by nature a social animal” (Brown 1959: 105).

The “twin ontological motives” (Becker 1973: 150-55) underlying this process, that is the need to unite and to separate, or to affirm oneself and to yield oneself, define a basic
contradiction of the human condition. Human beings try to identify themselves with the
society, or some grand, “cosmic” processes, yet as individuals they want to be “unique, to
stand out as something different and apart” (Becker 1973: 151-52). But such a condition is
bound to create some unbridgeable gaps between what the society wants from individuals and
what individuals themselves try to achieve: “Society wants to be the one to decide how people
are to transcend death; it will tolerate the *causa-sui* project only if it fits into the standard
social project.” In this regard the only way for one to become “the father of himself” could be
by “abandoning his own project and by giving it over to ‘The Fathers’” (Becker 1973: 46). To
accept this social project, therefore, will result in the violation of individuality; in this case,
immortality is achieved at the expense of “escaping from freedom” (Fromm 1941). This is the
essence of the phenomenon of “transference” in the sense that human beings transfer their
own powers of “making a difference,” in the world or in themselves, a shorthand but
convenient definition of the notion of “agency.” The basic motive guiding the act of
transference is to escape from the feeling of insignificance, finitude, and smallness resulting
from the fear of death. For this reason,

We enter symbiotic relationships in order to get the security we need, in order
to get relief from our anxieties, our aloneness and helplessness; but these
relationships also bind us, they enslave us even further because they support
the lie we have fashioned. So we strain against them in order to be more free.
(Becker 1973: 56)

According to Becker, because of the danger of being alone, isolated, and helpless,
human beings need to “appeal to something higher for justification, some conceptual support
for the meaning of one’s life from a transcendent dimension of some kind” (Becker 1973:
120). By transferring their own powers, capacities, and abilities into some “cosmic”
processes, entities, “leaders,” or even into material objects, they could affirm their
connectedness, and hence confer their lives some kind of “meaning.” This, we will see, the
problem of a whole human society under the market system. However, before exploring the
implications of such an analytical framework in respect of market society and the “fate” of people under this society, we need to consider the merits and problems associated with such a framework.

In fact, such an analytical framework informed by the psychoanalytical tradition, considering history as “a succession of immortality ideologies” (Becker 1973: 190), has some consequences that could create more analytical problems than it could actually solve. First of all, such a position seems to imply a kind of reductionism in its attempt at explaining a whole human existence, culture, and history on the basis of a “death instinct.” In fact, as Giddens (1984: 5) points out, we can mention not one, but two forms of reductionism that seem to exist in Freud’s own writings: one of them is a reductive understanding of social institutions which fails to leave sufficient role to the operation of autonomous social forces, for this theory seeks to show the foundation of social structures, processes, and institutions in the unconscious; and the second form of reductionism, which focuses on consciousness itself, leaves a limited role to human awareness, by seeking the principles governing social life without considering how agents are able to sustain reflexivity, another important characteristic of the notion of agency. Besides, the idea that behind the development of human society is a similar process governing the development of individual personality suggests an implicit theory of social evolution, whose analytical merit is open to question, even if we could ignore its reductionism of conflating social processes with individual phenomena (Giddens 1984: 243-45).

However, maybe the most important problem of this psychoanalytical interpretation of history, especially in its Freudian version, is its failure to distinguish between “human nature in general” and “human nature as historically modified in each epoch” (Marx 1976: 759n), a distinction Marx makes when he is criticizing Bentham’s understanding of the concept. That is to say, such an attempt at explaining human existence on the basis of the fear of death results in a failure to recognize the contradiction between the “essence” and the “existence” of
man under different forms of social organization. Therefore, even if we can consider this interpretation as a useful guide in understanding the connections between the fear of death, individuality, and sociality, it should be reinforced by a philosophical account emphasizing the “species character” of human beings, an account, it can be argued, that Polanyi himself adopts.

2. Market Society and Human Beings

A close cooperation between the social theory and the psychoanalytical tradition seems to be promising in understanding the connection among these three facts characterizing the human realm. The attempts along these lines by the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt school (e.g. Adorno et al. 1950; Marcuse 1955, 1964; Fromm 1941, 1961, especially 1962), focusing especially on the relations between Freud and Marx, and on the possibilities emerging from this cooperation in analyzing market society in general, have been fairly successful in providing psychological foundations to the theory of human nature that emphasizes the notion of alienation. Nevertheless, they seem to fail to relate these to the fear of death and thus to understand the inseparability of the three “discoveries” of these “facts” that Polanyi emphasizes: namely, the discovery of death, of individuality, and sociality. For this reason, it is necessary to consider these foundations and their connections to these facts.

Polanyi’s analysis in The Great Transformation, which considers the creation of the three “fictitious commodities,” land, labor, and money, and its result — the separation of human beings both from their own life activities and from their natural environments within which these activities occur — was the main cause the “breakdown” of the market society during the 1930s. Since what one calls “labor” is nothing but human activity, which cannot be separated from life, subordination of this activity under the rule of the market, by making it subject to the fear of hunger, will mean no less than the breakdown of the “totality” of life.
itself; human life is now broken down into specific compartments, such as economic, political, religious, etc., and only the “economic” motives — the fear of hunger and hope of gain — are allowed to govern individuals’ lives. In other words, human activity itself is now “commodified.” Yet this means the separation of man not only from his own life activity, but also, even more importantly, from his own “agency,” the power that characterizes human beings.

This process of the disintegration of a society by reducing to its “atoms,” each of which behaves on the basis of fear of hunger and hope of gain, is also a separation of human activity from the natural setting within which it takes place: that is to say, within this process land also is reduced to a commodity. These two joint steps, commodification of labor and land, characterizes a “dehumanization” process: under capitalism, human beings are forced to live a “perverse” life within which they are deprived of the very qualities that make them human or, to use Abraham Rotstein’s (1990: 100) metaphor, the market system represents the artificial, externalized embodiment of the individual or the “blind and dark alter ego.” The institutional structure of capitalism forces human beings to live a separate, fragmented life: in other words, under capitalism the “totality” of human existence breaks down, first into “economic” and “noneconomic” spheres, and second, mirroring the first one, into “material” and “ideal” values (Polanyi 1947: 116).

Yet, such an emphasis on the totality of human existence and an insistence on the “noneconomic nature of man” (Polanyi 1944: 151) requires a general understanding of human nature, as referring the general characteristics of human beings independent of historically specific aspects. In fact, in order to understand Polanyi’s overall project, it is necessary to distinguish between historically specific and general categories prevalent in his work. *The Great Transformation* is concerned with historically specific categories of the market economy. Nevertheless, the argument of the whole work depends critically upon the general,
transhistorical aspects of the human condition, as Polanyi emphasized. In this regard, Polanyi can be asserted to adopt an Aristotelian conception of human essence, emphasizing the potentialities of human beings. Incidentally, this position unites him with Marx; that is to say, Polanyi too, just like Marx, considered human beings as “species beings,” to use Marx’s term. Marx, like Aristotle, considers the essence of man as referring to “the inherent development potential of every human being when that development proceeded in the natural or proper way” (Hunt 1986: 97). If the conditions within which beings actually exist do not permit them to realize their own potential, then the existence of these beings contradicts their essences, although the essence is still a part of the being (Hunt 1986: 97). In terms of human beings, then, although their essence remains unmodified in the face of changing forms of the social relations within which they live, it is quite possible that the essence of people is contradicted by their existence. This is the key to understand Marx’s notion of alienation.

According to Marx, the condition that characterizes the essence of a human being is that a human being is a unity of the particular or, more accurately, individual, and the general, or social:

Man is a species-being, not only because he practically and theoretically makes the species—both his own and those of other things—his object, but also—and this is simply another way of saying the same thing—because he looks upon himself as the present, living species, because he looks upon himself as a universal and therefore free being (Marx 1975: 327).

A person is a species-being in two senses, though these two senses are in effect identical: a person is a species-being, first, “because of the nature of human perceptual and conceptual faculties and human life-activity,” and, second, “because of the social nature of human activity” (Hunt 1986: 97,98). That is, a person is a unity of individuality and sociality, or more appropriately, the individual is a social being; even his very existence is social activity:

I am still socially active because I am active as a man. It is not only the material of my activity ... which I receive as a social product. My own
existence is social activity. Therefore what I create from myself I create for society, conscious of myself as a social being.

... It is above all necessary to avoid once more establishing “society” as an abstraction over against the individual. The individual is the social being. His vital expression—even when it does not appear in the direct form of a communal expression, conceived in association with other men—is therefore an expression and confirmation of social life. Man’s individual and species-life are not two distinct things, however much—and this is necessarily so—the mode of existence of individual life is a more particular or a more general mode of the species-life, or species-life a more particular or more general individual life (Marx 1975: 350).

Then, according to Marx, human activity, whose description is the history itself, is an interaction with nature in a social setting: man’s own activity is a social activity mediated through his labor, and in this activity, or in his praxis, he transforms both nature, his “inorganic body” (Marx 1975: 328), and himself. In other words, this activity is to be seen as “either a society-mediated interchange with nature or a nature-mediated interchange with other humans” (Hunt 1986: 99). This conception of praxis, or the free purposeful activity of man to transform nature and himself, is essential in Marx’s thinking, for only through this activity can man “objectify” his essence:

It is therefore in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a species-being. Such production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labour is therefore the objectification of the species-life of man: for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created (Marx 1975: 329).

Therefore, three aspects of the human condition need to be emphasized in Marx: first, human beings are social beings, who appropriate nature in a social setting. Second, the terms “labor” and “production” together refer to a general activity; what we have here is “production of lives” rather than merely material goods production. Above all, this activity, or the “labor process” is a general condition: “It is the universal condition characterizing the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence” (Marx 1976: 290); therefore it is independent of all specific forms of human
existence. Labor is common to all forms of society because it is the process through which human beings realize their own essence; it actually characterizes what is human. If “labor” is a process within which labor power is used and “labor power” is to be defined as “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being” (Marx 1976: 270), in short if these are the conditions that characterize human agency, then it is no wonder that labor should be understood as the “objectification” of human essence. However, although the object that labor produces should be considered as the “objectification” of labor, under specific social relations this process also becomes a form of alienation, in the sense that

externalization of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien (Marx 1975: 324).

Marx sees alienation from four “vantage points” (Hunt 1979, 304): (1) the relation of man to the product he produces, (2) the relation of man to his own productive activity, (3) the relation of a man to his own “species-being,” and (4) the relation of man to other men. Man not only loose his own capacities and powers characterizing his individual agency, but also his connectedness to his species. In short, the process of alienation in Marx characterizes a “dehumanization” process in which the species character of human beings is negated. This, according to him, is a result of private property, for

private property made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc., in short, when we use it. Although private property conceives all these immediate realizations of possession only as means of life; and the life they serve is the life of private property, labour and capitalization (Marx 1973: 351-52).

Yet, although private property is the main cause, alienation as a process reaches its “peak” only in capitalism. The reason for this is that in this system, not only does man’s own
product but also his own labor power, the total mental and physical abilities characterizing his agency, becomes a commodity as an independent alien entity. Only with capitalism does the process of alienation “culminate” in fetishism and reification: on the one hand things seem to acquire human attributes while on the other human relations take on the character of things and thus have a “phantom objectivity;” that is, these relations are “reified” (Lukács 1971: 83).

Human relations, however, appear as relations between things only when both the products of labor and labor power itself become alienated. In other words, whereas the objects produced by man appear as the bearers of social relations, —i.e., fetishism— the social relations between real people appear as the relations between things, —i.e., reification. Hence both the terms fetishism and reification refer to the same process. In short, to use Polanyi’s words, “We are in a spectral world, but in a world in which spectres are real. For the pseudo-life of the commodity, the objective character of exchange value, are not illusion” (Polanyi 1935: 375).

Therefore, in this world of “specters,” as a result of the process of commodification or the creation of the fictitious commodities, which gives rise to a distinct economic sphere, the market, from the “rest” of the society and thus makes the society dependent on the market for its existence, the individual is increasingly being isolated through being reduced to homo oeconomicus. Nevertheless, although this process of fetishism and reification dissolves the social bond, it is also true that the individual becomes more and more dependent on other human beings at the same time because of the increasing social character of production. In other words, “the knowledge of society,” as Polanyi argued, “came to us through living in an industrial society” and it is “the constitutive element in modern man’s consciousness” (Polanyi 1944: 258A). That is, in the capitalist society, there is a contradiction between the “discovery of society” and the atomization of the individual. In Marx’s words, the more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a
greater whole.... Only in the eighteenth century, in “civil society,” do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means toward his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a ζώον πολιτικόν [political animal], not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society (Marx 1973: 84).

Hence, despite its destructive effects upon the social connectedness, the market system also creates the preconditions of “free” human beings, or the possibility of realizing their own potentialities. In other words, through making the individual realize his dependence on other individuals, that process makes individuals aware of the “reality of society.” In sum, regarding the “fate” of the individual, we have two contradictory tendencies in a market society: while emancipation from the ties that bind the individual makes him more and more independent, self-reliant, and critical, increasing alienation makes him more isolated, alone, and afraid (Fromm 1941: 104). And this is the point of connection among the three “facts” that characterize human beings.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, the process of alienation is but a special case of the notion of “transference.” This conception, according to Brown, is based upon the psychoanalytical theorem that the “sublimation” process can be related to the anal eroticism stage in infant in which soma symbolic meaning is attached to the anal product, for this product is seen by the child as his or her own creation. A direct implication of this view is that “some of the most important categories of social behavior (play, gift, property, weapon) originate in the anal stage of infantile sexuality and … never lose their connection with it” (1959: 191). In short, all forms of property and money are nothing but “excrements.” Here money, in the form of inorganic, dead matter, assumes the magical power which infantile narcissism attributes to the excremental product and it becomes “alive.” That is to say, the project of “becoming one’s own father” causes the infant to attribute this magical power, first,
to excrement, which is both a part of his body and could exist outside of it, then into money. In this regard, “property accumulations are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace, they are also the man’s life. And being the man’s life, things become alive and do what the man would like to do. Things become the god (the father of himself) that he would like to be: money breeds” (Brown 1959: 279). In fact, according to Brown (1959: 237-38), the *homo economicus* himself, an essential element of the modern, capitalist society, is an “anal” character representing the “alienated consciousness.” This character is governed by the desire to possess and form domination over material objects: “abstraction from the reality of the whole body and substitution of the abstracted impulse for the whole reality are inherent in *Homo economicus*” (Brown 1959: 237).

Even if such an interpretation seems to be disturbing for its alleged reductionism that we have mentioned above, it could illuminate an important aspect of the human existence. This interpretation actually shows why human beings are so willing to transfer their own powers to some entities at the expense of leaving their own freedom. The reason for this can be explained by the fact that most human activity, all economic activity for that matter, far from being a “rational” enterprise to satisfy human needs, is essentially a “sacred” activity taking “religious” forms, which in turn implies that man is essentially a “religious” or, at least, a moral being trying to constitute a “meaning” for his own existence in this world. But this, in turn, requires a discussion of the notion of “power.”

### 3. No Way Out? Essential Powers of Human Beings

As Polanyi warns us, “the pangs of hunger are not automatically translated into an incentive to produce” (Polanyi 1947: 111): the “human condition” is not primarily given by the economic motives. What made us think this way is nothing but “the organization of production under a market economy” (Polanyi 1947: 111). The above discussion suggests that
the drive to produce a “surplus,” or all kinds of material wealth, lies in the fact that wealth and money reflect the “power” of human beings; that is, these are to be possessed because of the “magical” power they represent. This shows that “all power is essentially sacred power” (Brown 1959: 251) because “it begins in the hunger for immortality; and it ends in the absolute subjection to people and things which represent immortality power” (Becker 1975: 49). For example, in “archaic” societies the tendency to produce a surplus, mostly in the form of food, can be explained by the fact that food “gives the power of life” (Becker 1975: 29). In fact, this is true for all material things: what they represent is the magical power of life:

Man, the animal who knows he is not safe here, who needs continued affirmation of his powers, is the one animal who is implacably driven to work beyond animal needs precisely because he is not a secure animal. The origin of human drivenness is religious because man experiences creatureliness; the amassing of a surplus, then, goes to the very heart of human motivation, the urge to stand out as a hero, to transcend the limitations of the human condition and achieve victory over impotence and finitude. (Becker 1975: 31)

That is to say, if the human life activity can be seen as, to use the Freudian metaphor, a project of becoming “one’s own father,” or of “making” oneself, and hence of finding a reason to live in the world, the “sacred” character of this activity is fairly obvious. Nevertheless, the denial of the reality of death causes human beings to “escape” from the essential powers characterizing their own “humanity” and thus leads to a denial also of their individuality and sociality. This, in turn, is the basic cause of “evil” (Becker 1975). For human beings, in their denial of, and hence attempt at controlling, death, transfer their own “powers” to some material objects, such as property, to some “cosmic” processes, to the “community” with which they affirm their connectedness, and even to some “leaders.” All assume a “magic” power of transcending death, and this transference creates the conditions in which the lives of human beings are being controlled by these external, “alien” powers that operate in “iron necessities.” Transference, “even after we admit its necessary and ideal dimensions,
reflects some universal betrayal of man’s own ideal dimensions, which is why he is always submerged by the large structures of society” (Becker 1973: 279).

Such a perspective also shows that the notion of “power” has two sides: on the one hand, it refers to total capacities, potentialities, and capabilities defining “agency,” as in the case of “labor power” referring to “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being” (Marx 1976: 270); and it refers to social forms and relations of domination, as in the class relations within society, on the other. There is a close connection between these two notions (Giddens 1984: 14-16).

According to the first aspect, powers refer to the notion of “agency” in the sense of “anything which is capable of bringing about a change in something (including itself)” (Bhaskar 1975: 109). That is, the notion of agency implies that in order for something to be an “agent” it must have some “causal power” in the sense that it has the potency to produce an effect in virtue of its nature, in the absence of constraint and when properly stimulated” (Harré and Madden 1975: 16). The “human” agency in this respect is defined by the human intentional action or praxis, which consists in causal intervention in the natural world and the reflexive monitoring of that intervention. (Bhaskar 1989: 81). Two important characteristics of the notion of agency is the power of “making a difference” and intentionality, referring to the purposeful activity of human beings, in which reflexivity plays an essential role.

However, as to the other side of the notion of power, we can mention social practices, institutions, and processes creating and reproducing domination; in this regard, the process of alienation or fetishism refer to these kind of “power” relations. The “alienated consciousness,” in Marx, or the “market mentality” in Polanyi, all refer to this process within which human beings loose the “freedom” characterizing their humanity. It can be stated that Polanyi’s social theory includes a moral philosophy within which human freedom plays an essential role. In other words, according to this social theory, social institutions are basically “expressions” of
the human essence or freedom; they are “embodiments of human meaning and purpose” (Polanyi 1944: 254). Unfortunately, under a specific form of social organizations, namely the market system, these institutions also impose constraints upon this freedom, if they do not negate this freedom. Under dominance of the market, purposive actions of human beings, directed to realize their own potentialities, have to operate within the constraints of social institutions that are subordinated to the fear of hunger and hope of gain. This process of “transference” in turn leads to the effect that the “abstraction” *homo economicus* becomes a reality (Brown 1959: 238). The result of this process, as Polanyi warns us, is fascism in which both “the uniqueness of the individual and of the oneness of mankind is negated” (Polanyi 1944: 258A).

Yet, this process is effective even in our contemporary society; while human beings on the one hand try to affirm their individuality, their difference so that they become, under the spell of the “market mentality,” mere “atoms,” they loose their very agency powers by putting themselves under the guidance of the market, thereby transferring it to the commodities, and hence into the market. The characteristic disposition of human beings in this society is “emulation” (Veblen 1899), which “is the driving force behind the transformation of pluralism into hegemony, of free will into mindless conformity” (Dugger 1989: 135). After the market becomes the dominant institution it dictates its own mentality and code of behavior which extends its influence to the “rest” of the society because, “with the rise to preeminence of one institution, the individuals participating in all the different institutional spheres begin to emulate the values, beliefs, and meanings of the one preeminent institution —forsaking the values, beliefs, and meanings of the alternative, declining institutions” (Dugger 1989: 142).

Such a situation characterizes a loss of freedom, not only at the individual level, but even more importantly, at the societal level as well. For this reason, Polanyi emphasizes the “right to nonconformity as the hallmark of a free society” (Polanyi 1944: 255), to be
protected, of course, institutionally. Yet, in order to find a “way out” of this “morbid” state on the societal level, individuals should try to draw upon their own agency power directed to realize their potentialities, without denying the reality of these three “facts,” namely reality of death, of individuality, and of sociality. That is to say, according to Polanyi, it is essential to resign one’s self to these three facts, for

resignation was ever the fount of man’s strength and new hope. Man accepted the reality of death and built the meaning of his bodily life upon it. He resigned himself to the truth that he had a soul to lose and that there was worse than death, and founded his freedom upon it. He resigns himself, in our time, to the reality of society which means the end of that freedom. But, again, life springs from ultimate resignation. Uncomplaining acceptance of the reality of society gives man indomitable courage and strength to remove all removable injustice and freedom. As long as he is true to his task of creating more abundant freedom for all, he need not fear that either power or planning will turn against him and destroy the freedom he is building by their instrumentality. This is the meaning of freedom in a complex society; it gives us all the certainty that we need. (Polanyi 1944: 258B)

Only by doing so could human beings affirm and realize themselves without any need to a mediator to which essential human powers are to be transferred. In short, what we need is to affirm our humanity. In fact, since the market system deprives humans of their very freedom, the imperative of protecting freedom poses a responsibility for the humanity as a whole: “the vital task of restoring the fullness of the life to the person, even though this may mean a technologically less efficient society” (Polanyi 1947, 116). It is essential to keep in mind what Polanyi has to say about the tragedy of Hamlet:

Hamlet is about the human condition. We all live, insofar as we refuse to die. But we are not resolved to live in all the essential respects in which life invites us. We are postponing happiness, because we hesitate to commit ourselves to live. This is what makes Hamlet’s delay so symbolic. Life is man’s missed opportunity. Yet in the end our beloved hero retrieves some of life’s fulfillment. The curtain leaves us not only reconciled, but with an accountable sense of gratitude towards him, as his sufferings had not been quite in vain. (Polanyi 1954: 350)
References


Ariés, Philippe (1974), *Western Attitudes towards Death* (translated by P.M. Ranum), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.


Notes

1 From The Science of Logic, 1, 42; quoted in Brown (1959: 104).

2 Such an argument has been developed in Özel (1997).

3 Part of the argument that Brown and Becker develop is the notion of “guilt” as a result of the feeling of “inhibition, smallness, and boundness” (Becker 1973: 35). Guilt, as corresponding again to the Oedipal phase, exists not only at the individual level, but also at the level of the whole human species (Brown 1959: chapter 15; Becker 1975: chapter 2). Those traits such as self-sacrifice for the community, or to share what is being possessed with the rest of the community etc., in short the traits characterizing “primitive” people, emanate from such a collective guilt. According to Brown, “guilt is mitigated by being shared, man entered social organization in order to share guilt. Social organization (including the division of labor) is a structure of shared guilt. Social organization brings the repressed unconscious guilt to consciousness…” (1959: 269). Nevertheless, neither Brown nor Becker seems successful in explaining the origin of this existential guilt. According to Becker, guilt originates from the fact that “man is on the ‘cutting edge’ of evolution; he is the animal whose development is not prefigured by instincts, an so he is open to becoming what he can. This means literally that each person is already somewhat ‘ahead of himself’ simply by virtue of being human and not animal” (1975: 34). But such a theme suggests that guilt originates from, metaphorically speaking, an “original sin,” or from being “thrown into the world;” a theme representing an existentialist orientation. In this regard, it should be mentioned that Becker (1973) draws heavily on the views of Kierkegaard (chapters 5, and 8).

4 For fuller discussions of the notions of agency power and nature, see Bhaskar (1975, 1989), Harré and Madden (1975) and Giddens 1984 (5-14).

5 In this regard, one can mention the fact that in the contemporary Western societies, especially in the US, this tendency seems to govern even burying practices, as Jessica Mitford (1987) shows forcefully: while individuals in their effort to show their differences by erecting some symbols that would survive after them, burying practices become a huge industry forcing people to behave in an emulative way, for “acquiring symbols of high status and displaying to others, while simultaneously denying them to others, is the essence of emulation” (Dugger 1989: 136). In fact, it can be argued that the origin of this disposition can be sought in the change, after the development of the market system, of the Western attitudes towards death (Ariés 1974).

6 Here, it is possible to talk about human beings’ willingness to forsake their own agency power, and freedom; that is, transference is for the most part intentional. The reason for this can be sought in the fact that individuals, in their quest to find immortality, actively participate in the production and reproduction of immortality ideologies, or any kind of ideology for that matter, through the attempts (of self-deception, wishful thinking, or willful ignorance), which are for the most part intentional (Whisner 1991, 1989).

7 In fact, this is the essence of Polanyi’s notion of the “double movement” describing the “self-protection” of the society against to the extension of the market (Polanyi 1944: 76). This self-protection represents human beings reclaiming their own humanity against the danger of annihilation posed by the market (Özel 1997).