
The Logic
of Liberty



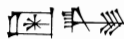
Michael Polanyi

The Logic of Liberty

REFLECTIONS AND
REJOINDERS

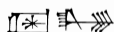
Michael Polanyi

Foreword by Stuart D. Warner



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of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay
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Foreword

Michael Polanyi was born in Budapest in 1891, and he died in 1976. His university studies initially centered on medicine, but he soon turned his attention to chemistry. By the early 1930s he had published more than one hundred seventy-five technical papers in the physical sciences and had held research positions in Germany at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Fibre Chemistry and at the Institute for Physical Chemistry. In 1933 he left Germany to become chair of physical chemistry at Manchester University. At a relatively young age Polanyi had been interested in the political life of Europe, and this interest intensified during the 1930s, as European civilization trembled before its future, and during the 1940s, as Europeans looked wistfully upon their past.

In 1938 Louis Rougier, inspired by Walter Lippmann's *An Inquiry into the Principles of a Good Society*, organized a meeting in Paris with the idea of forming an intellectual society that would strive to restore the ideals of classical liberalism. Polanyi was one of the twenty-six participants in that meeting; others included Raymond Aron, F. A. Hayek, and Ludwig von Mises. The society became moribund during the Second World War, but Hayek reclaimed the idea, and in 1947 he began the Mont Pelerin Society. Polanyi was one of the Mont Pelerin Society's sixty-four founding members, as were Bertrand de Jouvenel, Karl Popper, Hans Barth,

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Carlo Antoni, Milton Friedman, George Stigler, Frank Knight, and C. V. Wedgwood.

Though Polanyi continued writing scientific articles until 1949, their numbers began to diminish by the mid-1930s as he turned his intellectual energies to reflections about things human. A crucial experience in his intellectual pilgrimage occurred in 1935 when he visited Russia. What struck Polanyi most profoundly during his trip was Nikolai Bukharin's insistence that there was no real meaning to the distinction between pure and applied science—that science had value only when it furthered practical and material ends. Indeed, Bukharin argued that the very fabric of science *must* be sewn out of things practical and material, because it was the practical in life that was always responsible for scientific reflection. Believing that this instrumentalist conception represented a dangerous misunderstanding of science, and that it was gaining acceptance even in England where he lived, Polanyi wrote a series of articles in opposition to it and in support of the idea of the propriety of pure theoretical science.

Polanyi's reflections on the nature of science were first prompted and marked by the contingent circumstances of his own time; however, these reflections quickly assumed a distinctively philosophical cast, and they achieved their most acute understanding in *Personal Knowledge* (1958). The philosophical movement of Polanyi's thought endeavored to understand science as a model for an appreciably broader range of human activities—indeed, as a model for understanding some fundamental elements of the human situation. Polanyi's turn to philosophy eventually led to his appointment in 1948 as chair of social studies at Manchester.

The Logic of Liberty, first published in 1951, consists of a series of articles, all but one of which were written after the Sec-

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ond World War. Polanyi states in the preface that the book represents his “consistently renewed efforts to clarify the position of liberty in response to a number of questions raised by our troubled period of history.” This statement, coupled with the fact that several of the articles are rejoinders to the defenders of an instrumentalist conception of science, might tempt us to think the book dated or parochial. This is a temptation to be resisted, for that conception would be a wholly inadequate understanding of the character and temper of Polanyi’s book. As the very title of the work indicates, Polanyi’s overriding concern was how best to understand the fundamental structure of liberty. This is a perennial concern. He explores the subject both directly—especially in the second half of the book—and indirectly. This indirect line of inquiry reflects his desire to understand those contemporary movements—both theoretical and practical—that were inimical to liberty. In this regard, Polanyi believed that if he could grasp at least part of the reason why liberty was being eclipsed, he would at the same time indirectly comprehend more about the logic of liberty itself.

The Logic of Liberty explores the structure of *public* liberty. Polanyi’s understanding of public liberty turns on his conception of the forms of social order. There is a general tendency to think that all social order has been intentionally designed or achieved by some one person or group. Against this tendency, Polanyi holds that the social orders most important to human well-being are *spontaneous* orders, that is, orders that result from the interplay of individuals mutually adjusting their actions to the actions of others. Spontaneous orders are the result of human action but not of human design. Polanyi recognizes the economic market as a leading exemplar of such an order, and he points to Adam Smith as someone who insightfully articulated the logic of that order.

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However, what fascinates Polanyi more, and what he finds ultimately more revealing about liberty, are *intellectual* spontaneous orders, especially science.

Science is a spontaneous order, both in terms of the activity of science itself and the results of scientific inquiry. Through consultation, competition, and persuasion, scientists, moved by their own initiative, adjust their lines of investigation and judgment to the lines of investigation and judgment of other scientists. Polanyi believes, however, that for there to be a scientific order something more is needed—a channeling “device” through which the diverse actions of scientists are coordinated. This “device” is the goal, or end, of science, and Polanyi identifies this end as the pursuit of truth. For Polanyi, it is in the belief in the transcendent reality of truth that science has its extraordinary character as an intellectual *system*.

Science is not only Polanyi’s most important model of an intellectual spontaneous order, but it is also his most important model of a *public* liberty. The idea of public liberty is the most important concept in *The Logic of Liberty*—and it is also the most difficult to grasp. The difficulty lies in the fact that liberty today is most often thought of as either the rights of individuals to pursue private courses of action, or political liberties such as voting. The liberty Polanyi elucidates is something very different.

By “public liberty” Polanyi means a *liberty* the exercise of which contributes to the formation or maintenance of a spontaneous order. In the case of science, the liberty Polanyi speaks of refers to the activity of scientists acting on the basis of their own initiative in their attempts to understand the truth. Polanyi cites the common law as another example of an intellectual spontaneous order and, thus, as another example of a public liberty. Liberty here refers to the

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activity of judges adjusting their decisions to the decisions of other judges in order to arrive at a determination of justice.

What principally marks these liberties as *public* liberties is that the scientist and judge are acting as members of *public* institutions, namely, science and law. Indeed, it is because of the public benefits resulting from their actions that we accord the scientist and the judge the liberty to act on the basis of their own initiatives—subject, of course, to limitations inherent in the activities of science and judging that make them possible: public liberty is not public license. The liberty of the scientist and judge implicates them in a public trust—through partaking in a public institution, they have a fiduciary responsibility to the public. On this analysis of liberty, therefore, liberty and responsibility are inextricably intertwined.

Polanyi states in his preface that he champions a free society and not an “open” one. The distinction he draws is important because, to Polanyi, a free society, unlike an “open” one, is “dedicated to a distinctive set of beliefs,” namely, belief in the transcendent realities of truth, justice, charity, and toleration. It is belief in such realities, belief that constitutes a moral commitment incapable of proof, that characterizes a free society, and it is belief in such realities that makes public liberties both possible and justifiable. What Polanyi emphasizes is that a free society is characterized less by its private liberties and more by its public ones and its shared beliefs in a public realm.

A detailed consideration of what underlies a variety of criticisms of public liberty in Polanyi’s time figures prominently in his elucidation of his idea of public liberty. Science is Polanyi’s principal model of public liberty; science is also his principal model of public liberty under attack. The criticism

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of theoretical science levied by totalitarianism is anchored, Polanyi believes, in a materialistic view of human nature that rejects those realities—truth, justice, charity, and toleration—on which public liberty rests. The rejection of those realities leads to a conception of science as instrumental, and this conception requires that science be used in the service of material ends. In the hands of those who subscribe to the “virtues” of planned science, the activities of scientists should be directly prescribed by the State. Science as a public liberty is thus subverted. Indeed, under totalitarianism all public liberties are subverted: the State controls all “public” avenues of life. In this way, the power of the State becomes the only source of order and the adjudicator of all conflicts and disagreements, including intellectual ones, as evidenced by the Lysenko affair.

Obviously, totalitarianism relentlessly undermines liberty. Many who consider this fact focus on private liberty—individuals cannot pursue their own desires quite so readily, to say nothing of being subjected to sheer brutality. Although Polanyi surely recognizes this, he emphasizes instead the manner in which public liberty is eclipsed in totalitarian regimes. Motivating him here is his understanding that public liberty forms the inescapable foundation of a free society, a foundation that provides the conditions under which private liberty can achieve some degree of social efficacy. However, it is not, Polanyi thinks, only totalitarian movements that threaten public liberty. All movements of thought and practice that attempt to render spontaneous orders nugatory—that are captured by the idea that all social order either is or should be planned—also threaten public liberty and, thus, threaten the fabric of a free society.

That a free society—one in which public liberty reigns—and a good society—one animated by a belief in transcendent realities—are of a piece occupies a central place in *The*

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Logic of Liberty. Given this, and the argument of the preceding paragraph, one might expect Polanyi to declare that moral considerations are absent in totalitarian regimes. What Polanyi finds peculiar about totalitarianism is that despite its rejection of transcendent reality, it exhibits a high degree of moral passion. This moral passion, however, is not a mark of honor—instead, it is a mark of dishonor. Polanyi argues that the moral passions that in fact can animate totalitarianism—and also some of the less-virulent strains of human folly—have become unhinged from any reality that could restrain them. Here we have moral passion without any moral judgment. Polanyi maintains that a “moral inversion” has occurred: moral passion now invokes any means, however grotesque and *immoral*, to satisfy its longings. Under this guise, moral passion serves rather than spurns the cause of fanaticism. That is a cause which continues in our own times to pose a threat to the liberty that is the subject of Polanyi’s book.

Stuart D. Warner

Preface

It is unfortunate that not until we have unsystematically collected observations for a long time to serve as building materials, following the guidance of an idea which lies concealed in our minds, and indeed only after we have spent much time in the technical disposition of these materials, do we first become capable of viewing the idea in a clearer light and of outlining it architectonically as one whole according to the intentions of reason.

KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*

These pieces were written in the course of the last eight years. They represent my consistently renewed efforts to clarify the position of liberty in response to a number of questions raised by our troubled period of history. One aspect of liberty after another was reconsidered, as in the course of time each in turn revealed its vulnerability. This dialectic has covered a fair range of relevant issues and has, I believe, evoked some valid answers, proved in battle. I have thought of melting down the material and casting it into a mould of a comprehensive system, but this seemed premature. It cannot be attempted without establishing first a better foundation than we possess to-day for the holding of our beliefs.

But I hope that my collection may supply some elements of a future coherent doctrine, since it expresses throughout a consistent line of thought. I take more seriously here than

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was done in the past the fiduciary presuppositions of science; that is the fact that our discovery and acceptance of scientific knowledge is a commitment to certain beliefs which we hold, but which others may refuse to share. Freedom in science appears then as the Natural Law of a community committed to certain beliefs and the same is seen to apply by analogy to other kinds of intellectual liberty. On these lines, freedom of thought is justified in general to the extent to which we believe in the power of thought and recognize our obligation to cultivate the things of the mind. Once committed to such beliefs and obligations we must uphold freedom, but in doing so freedom is not our primary consideration.

Economic liberty I regard as a social technique suitable, and indeed indispensable, for the administration of a particular productive technique. While we are deeply committed to this technology to-day, other alternatives may one day present themselves with strong claims in their favour.

Freedom of the individual to do as he pleases, so long as he respects the other fellow's right to do likewise, plays only a minor part in this theory of freedom. Private individualism is no important pillar of public liberty. A free society is not an Open Society, but one fully dedicated to a distinctive set of beliefs.

There is a link between my insistence on acknowledging the fiduciary foundations of science and thought in general, and my rejection of the individualistic formula of liberty. This formula could be upheld only in the innocence of eighteenth-century rationalism, with its ingenuous self-evidences and unshakable scientific truths. Modern liberty, which has to stand up to a total critique of its fiduciary foundations, will have to be conceived in more positive terms. Its claims must be closely circumscribed and at the same time sharpened for a defence against new opponents, incompa-

PREFACE

rably more formidable than those against which liberty achieved its first victories in the gentler centuries of modern Europe.

I believe that these comprehensive questions cannot be handled with detachment, but that their treatment requires the full participation of the writer in the issues which form his subject. I have included therefore some addresses delivered on controversial occasions.

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M. P.

PART I

The Example of Science

Social Message of Pure Science¹ (1945)

Appplied science has a clear purpose: it serves our welfare and security. But what about pure science? What justification is there in scientific studies which have no visible practical use? Until fairly recently it used to be commonly assumed that such studies served their own purpose, the discovery of knowledge for the love of truth. Do we still accept that view? Do we still believe that it is proper for a scientist to spend public funds for the pursuit

1. In August 1938 the British Association for the Advancement of Science founded a new Division for the Social and International Relations of Science, which was largely motivated from the start by the desire to give deliberate social guidance to the progress of science. This movement gathered considerable momentum throughout the following years, so that when the Division met in December 1945 for a discussion on the Planning of Science, I expected the meeting to be overwhelmingly in favour of planning. My opening address, *The Social Message of Pure Science*, was written with this prospect in mind, but actually the occasion proved a turning point. Speakers and audience showed themselves consistently in favour of the traditional position of pure science, pursued freely for its own sake. Since then the movement for the planning of science has rapidly declined to insignificance in Britain.

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of studies such as, say, the proof of Fermat's theorem—or the counting of the number of electrons in the universe: studies which, though perhaps not lacking in some remote possibility of practical usefulness, are at any rate as unlikely to yield a material dividend as any human activity within the realms of sanity? No, we do not generally accept the view today, as we did until the nineteen-thirties, that it is proper for science to pursue knowledge for its own sake, regardless of any advantage to the welfare of society. Nor is the change due to altered circumstances, but it represents a fundamental turn of popular opinion, induced by a definite philosophical movement of recent times.

The philosophical movement which has thus called in question the traditional standing of science, has launched its attack from two different sides. One line of attack is directed against the claim of science to speak in its own right. This is the line of modern materialistic analysis, which denies that the human intellect can operate independently on its own grounds and holds that the purpose of thought is, at bottom, always practical. Science in this view is merely an ideology, the contents of which are determined by social needs. The development of science is then explained by the successive rise of new practical interests. Newton, for example, is represented as discovering gravitation in response to rising navigational interests and Maxwell as discovering the electromagnetic field stimulated by the need for transatlantic communications. Such a philosophy denies that pure science has a purpose in itself and wipes out the distinction between pure and applied science. Pure science is then valued mainly for not being altogether pure—for the fact that it may turn out to be useful in the end.

The other line of attack is based on moral grounds. It insists that scientists should turn their eyes to the misery which fills the world and think of the relief they could bring

SOCIAL MESSAGE OF PURE SCIENCE

to it. It asks whether, on looking round, they can find it in their hearts to use their gifts for the mere elucidation of some abstruse problem—the counting of the electrons in the universe, or the solution of Fermat's theorem. Could they possibly prove so selfish . . . ? Scientists are morally reproached for pursuing science for the mere love of knowledge.

Thus we can see the position of pure science to-day under the crossfire of two attacks based on rather disparate grounds; forming a somewhat paradoxical combination—but one that is actually typical of the modern mind. A new destructive scepticism is linked here to a new passionate social conscience; an utter disbelief in the spirit of man is coupled with extravagant moral demands. We see at work here the form of action which has already dealt so many shattering blows to the modern world: the chisel of scepticism driven by the hammer of social passion.

This recalls the wider implications of our problem, revealed by the spectacle of Europe. The destruction of our civilization over large stretches of the Continent was not due to some accidental outbursts of Fascist beastliness. The events which, starting from the Russian Revolution, have ravaged the Continent represent on the contrary a single coherent process: one vast general upheaval. Great waves of humanitarian and patriotic sentiments were its prime impulses, and it was these sentiments which actuated the destruction of Europe. Savagery is always there lurking among us; but it can break loose on a grand scale only when rebellious moral passions first break up the controls of civilization. There are always some potential Hitlers and Mussolinis about, but they can gain power only if they succeed in perverting moral forces to their own ends.

We must ask, therefore, why moral forces could be thus perverted?; why the great social passions of our time were turned into violent and destructive channels? The answer