

Polanyi Society-Sponsored Zoom Sessions

September 2021

Below are materials prepared for Zoom presentations/discussions of September 24 and September 25, 2021 as well as recordings of sessions. Posted materials are for non-commercial use of scholars and students.

There were two Zoom sessions on both September 24 and September 25, 2021 (each about an hour in duration), but these two sessions are both on a single continuous recording. There is a short break at the end of the first session (the recorder is turned off) and then the recording begins again abruptly. You should be able to use the “fast forward” to locate the session that is of interest.

Below you will find a recording of sessions that is on the Zoom Cloud as well as the SAME recording on the Polanyi Society website. The equipment on the Zoom Cloud recording is likely somewhat more sophisticated (e.g., the “fast forward” is easier to operate) than on your local machine which the recording on the Polanyi Society website will use. But the link for the Zoom Cloud recording will quit working at the point the Polanyi Society rental agreement ends. The link on the Polanyi Society website should, however, continue to operate using your local player.

In presentations on John Rawls and Michael Polanyi on September 25, 2021, presenters used PowerPoint slides. There is a link for the sets of slides used in the presentations by Bíró, Howard and Lowney.

Friday, September 24

11:00 a.m. Central Standard Daylight-Saving Time, **Andrew Grosso**, “Polanyi among the Pluralists”

Early in the twentieth century, a number of British scholars sought to describe an approach to social, political, and economic life that could serve as an alternative to both collectivism and individualism. This approach came to be known as “pluralism,” various forms of which were advanced by F.W. Maitland, J.N. Figgis, H.J. Laski, G.D.H. Cole, and G. Unwin. This paper examines some of the principal characteristics of the social, political, and economic thought of the English pluralists and compares them to the thought of Michael Polanyi, for the purpose of both (first) situating Polanyi’s efforts within their historical context and (second) exploring possible ways pluralist thought might be brought to bear on more contemporary social and political challenges.

GROSSO READING FOR PARTICIPANTS

[Session Recording on Zoom Cloud:](#)

[Session Recording on Polanyi Society Website:](#)

12:15 p. m. Central Standard Daylight-Saving Time, **Martin Moleski, S. J.**, “At Home in the Universe Again: Doing Justice to Polanyi’s Theological Intuitions.”

Martin X. Moleski, S. J. 2013 (Sept.-Dec.). *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*. V. 36, No. 3-5: 160-175. Published in 2020. <https://utpjournals.press/doi/full/10.3138/uram.36.3-4.160>.

Abstract: In this article, the author offers a reappraisal of Michael Polanyi’s understanding of ultimate reality and meaning, dropping the charge that Polanyi was functionally an atheist and assembling fresh material from primary sources in order to reach a more just assessment of the quality of his faith in a divine reality. In the second part of the article, the author takes a fresh look at the theological implications of Polanyi’s epistemology of tacit knowing and personal knowledge, no longer treating his assertions about ultimate reality as ill-fitting elements of an essentially secular philosophy but truly as the focal point of Polanyi’s most important insights.

MOLESKI READING FOR PARTICIPANTS

[Session Recording on Zoom Cloud:](#)

[Session Recording on Polanyi Society Website:](#)

Saturday, September 25

11:00 a. m. Central Standard Daylight-Saving Time, **Andy Steiger**, “Deciphering Humanity: What Polanyi and the Rosetta Stone Can Teach Us About Being Human”

In 1799, the Rosetta Stone was discovered in Egypt. This unassuming black rock became the key by which to revive the then dead language of Egyptian hieroglyphics. For Polanyi, machines were the Rosetta Stone by which to decipher human purpose. In this session, Andy Steiger will apply insights from Polanyi’s philosophy of a machine ontology to identify humanity’s purpose. The result will demonstrate that the key to

decoding a biological machine is understanding the distinction between static and dynamic purpose. By understanding the limits of static purpose and the potential of dynamic purpose, humanity can be deciphered. Although Polanyi does not directly apply his machine ontology to humanity, he does anticipate its conclusion.

STEIGER READING FOR PARTICIPANTS

[Session Recording on Zoom Cloud:](#)

[Session Recording on Polanyi Society Website:](#)

12:15 p.m. Central Standard Daylight-Saving Time, **Charles Lowney, Eric Howard, Gábor Bíró**, Panel and Discussion: Michael Polanyi and John Rawls in Dialogue

Michael Polanyi wrote extensively on Liberalism. He models a *good* Liberal society on the sort of mutual authority and co-operation that takes place in science, and condemns central planning and top-down authority, both in economics and in Liberal social and political structures. A liberal society progresses toward truth and justice by the exercise of public liberty, but this progress relies on traditions and traditional institutions, as dynamic systems, and a commitment of people within those traditions to transcendent principles. Polanyi thus forms a new understanding of Liberalism that stands in contrast to Classical and Neo-Liberalism. John Rawls also develops a new model of how a good Liberal society should function. He, too, develops an understanding of the sort of rationality and freedom that is at work, and he displays the principles that should guide us in a Political Liberalism. In this workshop, three authors working on Polanyi's Social, Political and Economic thought will discuss what they find to be strong similarities or sharp contrasts between the thought of Polanyi and Rawls.

Gábor Bíró will discuss Rawls' conception of the "Original Position" and contrast this with Polanyi's conception of all knowledge as Personal. The question here is whether we can ever actually extract ourselves from our lived situation and beliefs in order to place ourselves behind Rawls' "Veil of Ignorance" and structure our society in a fair way.

BÍRÓ READING FOR PARTICIPANTS

Bíró Power Point Used in Presentation

Eric Howard will then discuss similarities in Polanyi and Rawls criticisms of the utilitarian and libertarian notion of private freedom. Both recognize private freedom (and its regulation via the "no harm principle") as an inadequate basis for social and political life, and see the emphasis on private freedom as a force that acts against social cohesion. In response, Polanyi develops the notion of Public Liberty, and Rawls

develops the notion of Political Autonomy. Differences become manifest, however, when we see that public liberty takes place in the space of a commitment to dynamic traditions, which Rawls would consider “comprehensive moral doctrines.” and Rawls distinguishes Political Autonomy from the Ethical Autonomy that depends on those doctrines. Furthermore, this liberty, in Polanyi’s view, invokes metaphysical principles by invoking transcendent values. Rawls, however, believes that Political Autonomy cannot rest on metaphysics. Howard thus raises the question of whether or not Polanyi’s and Rawls’ views become incommensurable.

HOWARD READING FOR PARTICIPANTS

Howard Power Point Used in Presentation

Charles Lowney agrees that the idea of a “freestanding rationality,” which Rawls endorses, makes no sense from Polanyi’s epistemology, in which we are thoroughly engaged in a personal knowledge of reality. However, from an emergentist perspective, Lowney finds strong parallels between Rawls and Polanyi. He sees Rawls conception of a (relatively) “freestanding” political rationality as a real emergent feature of a political society that emerges to act as an umbrella over a variety of different social and cultural traditions, holding them together in a mutually beneficial political structure. This higher-order level of meaning is something that we can think from, though it must be admitted--even as a higher-order view--that this development is an emergence from *within* the Liberal Tradition itself, and it cannot be cleanly divided from the notion of a comprehensive moral doctrine.

From this perspective we can again ask if we can inhabit the original position, behind a (relative) veil of ignorance, and successfully abstract from features of our own comprehensive doctrine and particular lived situation enough to recognize what is fair from our higher-level, Liberal, political, personal commitments.

We can also ask again about the relation of Public Liberty and Political Autonomy. Although Polanyi recognizes principles as metaphysical, can the notions of Truth, Justice, and Freedom be bracketed out from metaphysics and work as abstractly as Rawls suggests? Can Polanyi’s Public Liberty be the more concrete expression of Rawls’ Political Autonomy?

Time permitting, we can also examine other points of comparison between Rawls and Polanyi, such as

1. Whether Polanyi could endorse Rawls’ two principles of justice.
2. Whether their common criticisms of Utilitarianism as being compatible with slavery, shows the need for moral principles in politics that go beyond social welfare.

3. Whether Rawls allows for top-down controls that Polanyi would disavow, particularly in the just distribution of some of Rawls' "Primary Goods."
4. Whether Polanyi's notion of mutual cooperation and emergent social order is strong enough to hold society together.
5. Whether forms of capitalism or socialism are compatible with Liberal Political structures as Polanyi and Rawls see them.

LOWNEY READING FOR PARTICIPANTS

Lowney Power Point Used in Presentation

[Session Recording of Bíró, Howard and Lowney on Zoom Cloud:](#)

[Session Recording of Bíró, Howard and Lowney on Polanyi Society Website:](#)