

Michael Polanyi and C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*
Polanyi Society Zoom Discussion Group Led by Jon Fennell
February 5 & 12, 2022

For a number of years Michael Polanyi and C. S. Lewis lived a short distance from one another in Oxford, England. No record has thus far been uncovered indicating that they conversed or corresponded. We know, however, that Polanyi owned four of Lewis's books. One of these, *The Abolition of Man*, is mentioned at least once by Polanyi in his published writings. That the two men were acquainted is likely, given that Polanyi spoke in 1952 and 1953 at the Socratic Club (of which Lewis was "President") when Lewis was still at Oxford University (prior to accepting an appointment at Cambridge in 1954).

The Abolition of Man is a compilation of three lectures delivered by Lewis at the University of Durham on February 23, 24, and 25, 1943. Though the resulting book is very short in length and not at first readily comprehensible (especially to lay readers), its significance was immediately recognized and it has earned the respect of a surprising variety of scholars (strikingly including, for example, Leo Strauss).ⁱ It is no wonder that Polanyi too was touched by and prompted to comment on it.

Students of Polanyi are likely to find many aspects of *Abolition* to be familiar. While many of these elements are specific and apparent, the congruity of this book and the core of Polanyi's thought is most notable in regard to the broad and persistently complex questions of the crisis of modernity and what can and should be done to respond to it. The longer one dwells on *Abolition* and *Personal Knowledge* in the light they cast on one another, the more it is evident that Lewis and Polanyi are fellow combatants in a common cause. No one should read either of these authors without due regard for the other.

On February 5, during the first of our sessions (beginning at 11 a.m. CST), we will focus on *Abolition* itself. What is Lewis up to? What is the central problem of our time? What remedies for it exist? In what arena is the battle necessarily to be fought? If you do not already own the book, inexpensive copies of *Abolition* are easily found. (For the sessions we will be using the pagination in the currently available paperback HarperSanFrancisco or HarperCollins or HarperOne edition.)

On February 12, the second of our sessions (also beginning at 11 a.m. CST) will bring a Polyanian perspective to the matters raised by *Abolition* and were the focus of the initial Zoom discussion. To facilitate the conversation and provide specific items for examination and reflection, we will be guided by Jon [Fennell's "A Polyanian Perspective on C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*."](#)

Please plan to join us for both sessions. To register and thereby receive the relevant Zoom links, send an e-mail to both Gus Breyspraak gus.breyspraak@ottawa.edu and Phil Mullins

(mullins@missouriwestern.edu) and you will receive by e-mail the link and password for the sessions.

ⁱ Russell Kirk stated that the first book that ought to be read by a college graduate who had not in fact received an education is *The Abolition of Man*. Number two on his list was *Personal Knowledge*.