

# New Voices: An Interview with Paul Knepper

## Michael Polanyi and Judaism

### ABSTRACT Key Words

*In this interview, Paul Knepper, Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, and Research Fellow, Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Manchester and one of the only scholars to take an interest in Michael Polanyi's links to Judaism, responds to questions about this topic posed by Tradition and Discovery editor Phil Mullins.*

**Phil Mullins:** *As you have pointed out, Polanyi's Jewish background has been relegated to a footnote in most Polanyi scholarship. There is virtually a cottage industry devoted to discussing Polanyi's exposure to, interest in, and appropriation of Christianity, but no scholar that I am aware of before you has looked seriously at Polanyi's debt to Judaism. I gather that you see Polanyi as in some ways a typical Jewish intellectual from Central Europe living through the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. That is, several of Polanyi's ideas and attitudes are rooted in his early life as a nonobservant Jew from Budapest who faced the great changes in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.*

**Paul Knepper:** Yes, I think Polanyi's Jewish background is important for understanding his philosophical outlook. His background as well as his experience as an émigré during the Second World War is important.

Jewish identity had become rather complicated for Central European Jewish intellectuals before the First World War. The educated and affluent Jews of Budapest, Vienna, and Prague, all part of the empire of Austria-Hungary, were caught between ethnic, religious, political and nationalist loyalties. Franz Kafka, for example, who was born in Prague, was a non-religious Jew caught between German and Czech identities. He resolved this in practical terms by identifying with German-speakers in Prague. Although, as Kafka expressed through various literary works, he had considerable anxiety about where and to whom he belonged.

Polanyi followed a similar strategy. He admired Germany--Germany's scientific and technological achievements--and having acquired his post at one of the Kaiser Wilhelm institutes, identified quite strongly with German culture. So strongly, in fact, that he did not want to leave even as Hitler was making his intentions clear. He rejected the first offer he received from the University of Manchester.

What I argue is that Polanyi's work also reflects his status as a Jewish intellectual, particularly in his theory of scientific knowledge. He envisions a community of scientists at work; individuals engage one another and rely on one another. This puts the scientist on the verge of discovery in a curious position; he or she is part of the group and yet no longer part of the group. This, I would argue, reflects Polanyi's own position with regard to other Jews. As a Jew who had been baptized, he was part of the Jewish community and yet not part of it. Essentially, this is a variation of an argument Malachi Hacoheh makes about Karl Popper. Popper, like Polanyi, clung to a vision of a "republic of science" in which those committed to finding the truth experienced a sense of community, a scientific community in which membership was not determined by religious, political, ethnic or national status.

Or, let me put it this way. What was more significant to Polanyi's philosophy as expressed in *Personal Knowledge*: his Catholic baptism in 1919 or his leaving Germany as a Jewish scientist in 1933? I think it's difficult to argue that baptism made much of a difference. It was one day in the course of his career as a German

scientist and he says as much in his letter to a Catholic correspondent. But leaving Germany as a Jew was a major moment; it was the turning point really. During the 1930s when he lectures openly in Manchester and Liverpool about Jewish identity, his interests shift from practicing science to thinking about the place of scientific knowledge in society. He stops writing in German and writes in English. He identifies with Britain; no longer a scientist, no longer German.

**Phil Mullins:** *When Polanyi came to Manchester in 1933, he soon came into contact with what you termed in your TAD article “Manchester Zionists” and more generally with Anglo Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Louis Namier was a Manchester colleague and friend but one whose views he did not share. Polanyi gave a few speeches and eventually published the 1943 article “Jewish Problems”<sup>2</sup> which articulates criticisms of Judaism and Zionism. Put rather directly, you argue that Polanyi lacked firsthand knowledge of Jewish culture and his criticisms often are based largely on stereotypes of Eastern Judaism which he likely picked up in early schooling.*

**Paul Knepper:** Let me answer your question in reverse order; I will speak to Polanyi’s comments about Judaism first. It is clear from Polanyi’s work that he does not make use of concepts from Judaism as he does from Christianity. As Martin Moleski pointed out in an email message to me, he does not quote from the Talmud or use Hebrew expressions. Further, when Polanyi does talk about Jewry, he does so with a certain detachment. He says that he is not attracted to Judaism and makes a number of negative comments about religious Jews.

This is, as I explain in the *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* article, not unusual for affluent European Jews.<sup>3</sup> Across European cities, acculturated, bourgeois Jews were embarrassed by the appearance of Jews from the Pale of Settlement who began migrating into European cities after 1881. For Jews who thought themselves secure in their national homes, the arrival of desperately poor Jews from rural areas was unsettling. When I read Polanyi’s comments about Jews, I hear the voice of a secular Jew from a wealthy area of Budapest annoyed by the links the new arrivals made between Jewish identity and religious practise Polanyi regarded as nothing short of superstition.

It is important to understand where Polanyi is coming from when he rejects Judaism. He is not speaking as someone who attended synagogue, underwent the course of study for bar mitzvah, lit Hanukkah candles at home every year, and so on. He never really experienced Jewish life. What he knows, he knows from a distance, and I surmise that some of his attitude comes from his second-hand knowledge. This point was suggested to me by Sheldon Richmond. At gymnasiums of the sort Polanyi attended, the practise was to separate Jewish students for religious training. A rabbi appeared for an hour or so during the week to give instruction. This, I think, is the perfect formula for acquiring a cynical attitude.

I am even more convinced of this after researching the reaction of Britain’s Jews to new arrivals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Anglo-Jewry, comprised of London’s leading Jewish families such as the Rothschilds and Montefiores, were embarrassed by Russian Jews arriving in London. They feared that the antisemitism directed at these new arrivals—there were accusations of pauperism, sweat-shop labour, and criminality—would set back the position of Jews in Britain. So, they embarked on a campaign to make Russian Jews respectable by encouraging them to wear English clothing, stop speaking Yiddish, and pursue liberal forms of Judaism.

Zionism—the other part of your question—is interesting because Polanyi, who claims to be indifferent to Jewish identity, feels compelled to write about it. Once in Manchester, Polanyi encounters Lewis Namier, who like Polanyi is a Jew who expressed affinity for Britain and Christianity. Namier argues that the founding of a Jewish state is the solution to the “problem” of European Jews and works to establish the modern state of Israel. Namier had a gift for annoying people in his advocacy and he managed to annoy Polanyi to the extent that Polanyi writes an article in response, the article we know as “Jewish Problems.”

What Polanyi does in this article is fascinating, and revealing, because he does not address the contemporary scene. He does not talk about violence against Jews in Palestine nor that of Hitler’s Germany; he doesn’t talk about what British policy should be, nor really, what the position of Jews in England should be (whether to continue to boycott German goods or something more/else). Instead, he talks about medieval Jews and rabbis. He talks about Jewish intellectuals before the First World War, about the Austrian socialist party; he worries about how Namier’s argument sounds to British ears and expresses his own thoughts about Jewish identity. I suppose what I find most interesting about this is Polanyi’s reflections on his own status. He expresses some bitterness about being taken as an apostate by Jewish leaders and, in the same pages, talks about feeling guilty for allowing himself to be taken as a non-Jew by British people.

So, one could say that Polanyi lived outside the Jewish community and that his Jewish status was irrelevant. But this would be a mistake. Polanyi himself claims this but his Jewish identity kept intruding—his choice of study as a university student (medicine), his departure from Germany, his debate with Zionists.

**Phil Mullins:** *In the same year “Jewish Problems” appeared, Polanyi published “The English and the Continent.”<sup>4</sup> This was the article a few Moot members saw and it led to an invitation from Oldham to Polanyi to join the Moot. Although the Moot was a Christian group, there were a few secular Jews in it, including Mannheim. The Moot was focused on how some kind of order, a “Christian Order” to some, was to be restored after the war. Polanyi at times expressed discomfort with the Christian aspect of the Moot, but he clearly admired the English tradition, as he discusses in “The English and the Continent.” So, on the one hand, he seems to have been dismissive of Judaism and its traditions, and on the other, he seems to be discovering the importance of tradition for his philosophy of science and his vision of the liberal society. This strikes me as somewhat ironic.*

**Paul Knepper:** You raise two points I think I can comment on. Polanyi thought, along with a number of others, that individual nations in Europe would give way after the Second World War to a kind of European commonwealth (and the European Union as we see it today reflects a political process that began in this period). In the final paragraphs of “Jewish Problems,” Polanyi refers to this as a fusion of Jewish and Christian ideals as had existed in the first century. This idea may have come from his experience with the Moot. So far as I know, he does not raise this idea in any of his other work, published or unpublished. When I first came across this, it struck me as quite an extraordinary statement, but since then, I have come across other Jews in Britain who pursued a similar line. In the decades before the First World War, Claude G. Montefiore, a founder of the Jewish Religious Union, promoted a syncretistic Judaism in response to his perception of rising unbelief in British society. He feared that Jews assimilating into British society would abandon the religious life, and sought to create a more satisfying version of Judaism by introducing aspects of Christianity.

Your point about tradition is evocative. Tradition is important to Polanyi’s thinking about the production of scientific knowledge. He admired the British tradition, including the Protestant aspect. I believe

he makes the remark in the “English Tradition” essay about the British stopping trains and buses on Sundays as if no one would be going anywhere other than church. Had Polanyi explored Jewish tradition—the prayers said in synagogue, observances in the home surrounding Shabbat, practices surrounding Pesach, Yom Kippur on so on, he might have felt the same way. But of course he didn’t explore Jewish tradition.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Paul Knepper, “Polanyi, ‘Jewish Problems’ and Zionism,” *Tradition and Discovery*, 2005, 32(1):6-19.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Polanyi, “Jewish Problems,” *The Political Quarterly*, January-March 1943, 14:33-45.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Knepper, “Michael Polanyi and Jewish Identity,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 2005, 35(3):263-293.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Polanyi, “The English and the Continent,” *The Political Quarterly*, October-December, 1943, 14:372-381.

## Notes on Contributors

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**Mark T. Mitchell** (mtmitchell@phc.edu) is Assistant Professor of Government at Patrick Henry College. He recently published the newest introduction to the thought of Michael Polanyi (*Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing*) and he is finishing a new book on rootlessness and democracy. His article “Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott: Common Ground, Uncommon Foundations” was included in *TAD* 28:2.

**Peter H. Plesch** is Professor Emeritus at the University of Keele. He is a physical chemist who worked in Michael Polanyi’s lab in the forties.

**Jim Tiles** (jtiles@hawaii.edu) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hawai’i at Manoa. He is author of three books, *Things that Happen* (1981), *Dewey* (1988) and *Moral Measures* (2000) and edited a four volume, *Dewey: Critical Assessments* (1992) and co-authored (with his wife) *An Introduction to Historical Epistemology* (1993).

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# A Brief Symposium on Mark Mitchell's *Michael Polanyi*

Mark T. Mitchell. *Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006. Pp. 195+xvii. ISBN 1-932236-90-2 (cloth, \$25 or \$20 at isibooks.org) and 1-932236-91-0 (paper, \$15 or \$12).

**ABSTRACT Key Words:**Mark Mitchell; Michael Polanyi; Michael Polanyi's life and thought; personal knowing; Michael Polanyi political philosophy; Michael Oakeshott, Eric Voegelin, Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Polanyi.

*Paul Lewis and Walter Gulick summarize and evaluate Mark Mitchell's new book, Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing, and Mitchell responds to their comments in this symposium article.*

## I. Mark Mitchell's New Introduction to Polanyi Paul Lewis

In this book, Mark Mitchell, Assistant Professor of Government at Patrick Henry College, provides a thorough-yet-concise and exceptionally lucid introduction to the thought of Michael Polanyi. Tacitly organizing his treatment into three parts, Mitchell begins with a brief biography of Polanyi (Chapter One). Mitchell then moves to a summary of Polanyi's emerging philosophy that roughly follows its chronological development. Mitchell first treats Polanyi's early writings on economics, science, and politics (Chapter Two) then turns to an extended discussion of his epistemology (Chapter Three) before concluding this *de facto* section of the book by examining how Polanyi extrapolates from this epistemology to explore matters of meaning, morality, and religion (Chapter Four). Mitchell concludes with an examination of Polanyi's legacy by comparing his work with that of philosophers Michael Oakeshott, Eric Voegelin, and Alasdair MacIntyre.

The portrait of Polanyi that emerges from Mitchell's treatment is that of a person whose work is passionately motivated by a moral concern to which he creatively responds by seeking a *via media* between the dichotomies offered by modern thought. While Polanyi himself talks most about intellectual passions, Mitchell effectively highlights the profoundly moral passion that drives Polanyi's work, i.e., his perception of what one might call the bi-polar character of the twentieth-century West. On the one hand, that century witnessed advances in the sciences and technology that brought about both significant and real gains. On the other hand, the twentieth century also saw an increase in the destructive capacities of the West, largely because these endeavors had become de-coupled from the moral and spiritual resources that could have kept them under tighter control (ix-xi). Polanyi's term for this phenomenon is moral inversion, which he sees as the legacy of a perfectionism bequeathed to the West from Christianity that remains deeply engrained in the West's collective psyche, at the same time that society is left rootless by a pervasive moral skepticism (54-55).

Polanyi's quest to recover a moral grounding for human projects leads him to take the middle path in virtually all of the dimensions of life he examines. In his economic writings, Polanyi develops a notion of polycentricity that allows him to diffuse debates between laissez-fair capitalists and advocates of central planning by largely synthesizing Keynesian economics on tax policy with a form of monetarism that eventually merges into public awareness through the work of Milton Friedman (28). In his account of how science works, Polanyi finds a way to honor both modernity's hard-won commitment to freedom of inquiry and the emphasis that older western traditions place on authority. Polanyi does this by demonstrating how, in science,

“individual freedom [of inquiry] is restrained by an authority that is *created by the practitioners themselves*” out of a shared commitment to transcendent ideals/ends (50, emphasis added). With regard to politics, Polanyi argues that the cause of the twentieth century’s moral inversion is the development of a view of knowledge that denies the reality of moral truth (52). His solution is therefore to develop a new understanding of knowledge that can support the liberty necessary for human flourishing.

Polanyi’s epistemology, nascent in these early writings, comes to full flower in *Personal Knowledge* and *The Tacit Dimension*. Mitchell ably summarizes Polanyi’s epistemology by saying, “Personal knowledge is a passionate commitment to universal truth made by limited, fallible knowers who strive to make contact with a hidden, indeterminate reality and embrace their findings with universal intent” (103). He argues that Polanyi’s account of knowing successfully steers a course between the temptations of subjectivism and objectivism by affirming that the knower actively participates in knowing things that have an objective character. According to Polanyi, the knower, fully embedded in multiple levels of existence (body, language, culture, history, personal capacities [76, 85-90]), actively participates in knowing via tacitly integrating clues into a larger whole (70) on the basis of a range of passionate commitments (to a framework, to universal intent, and to belief in the existence of reality [91-95]). What is known therefore has a personal character because of the knower’s active integration of clues. What is known also has an objective character because it is responsive to contact with reality. Such knowledge is never final, however, for contact with reality is gradual and reality can manifest itself in indefinite and not-entirely-predictable ways (83). This means that while knowing necessarily is embedded in a tradition, that tradition is fluid and living, what Mitchell terms “dynamic orthodoxy” (67).

An implication of this theory of knowing is that what is real cannot, indeed must not, be limited to what is tangible. Indeed, Polanyi argues that intangibles, such as freedom, are not merely subjective preferences but things that are *most* real. At this point, Mitchell discusses Polanyi’s understanding of how comprehensive wholes (whether a person or a work of prose) are comprised of multiple levels related through a complex set of boundary conditions that allow for dual control (109-110). Just as the meaning of a literary work, arguably its most important quality, arises out of various tacit integrations, so too do intangibles like freedom. These become most real, according to Mitchell, because they “promise a wider range of unexpected future manifestations” (112). Polanyi thus finds a way to bring together another set of terms that modernity had split asunder, i.e., facts and values.

This way of construing meaning also has implications for morality and religion. Recognizing that Polanyi never developed a moral theory, Mitchell suggests that moral ideals would be seen in a Polyanian perspective as the product of tacit integrations that are used subsidiarily in reflection and that moral knowledge is learned, like all knowledge, under the tutelage of a teacher who is part of a community that adheres to a tradition (114-117). A Polyanian account of moral knowing would therefore chart a path between moral objectivism and emotivism, for the same reasons that Polanyi’s epistemology overcomes the splits between subjective/objective and facts/values. With regard to religion, Polanyi’s theory of knowing promises to provide a way to bridge the gap between faith and reason (as well as science and religion), since faith, of a sort, is central to all knowing (128-132).

Mitchell’s concluding treatment of Polanyi’s legacy falls into two parts. In the first, he identifies thinkers with whom Polanyi’s work shares some affinities. Oakeshott and Polanyi share a sense of the means by which knowledge is gained and a sense that the problem with politics is a misguided epistemology, despite

that fact that Oakeshott remains somewhat skeptical of Polanyi (142-144). Polanyi and Voegelin share similar concerns about the dangers of radical skepticism coupled with moral perfectionism (although articulated differently), the place of faith in knowing, and a commitment to realism (149-154). MacIntyre, who belatedly comes to appreciate Polanyi, shares with Polanyi a desire to overcome the false dichotomies offered by modernity and recover a meaningful basis for moral and theological discourse (157-162). In the second part of his conclusion, Mitchell looks beyond affinities with other thinkers to the continuing timeliness of Polanyi's work. As Mitchell tells it, while the drive for perfectionism has been replaced by a hedonism that results in a rootless consumerism (162-165), religious and moral skepticism remain rampant today (162). Thus Polanyi's contention that the liberty necessary for human flourishing must serve transcendent ideals remains as timely as ever. Moreover, Mitchell asserts that Polanyi's commitment to realism, the fiduciary character of knowing, and the rootedness of all knowing provide a better way to talk about moral and spiritual truths than post-modern alternatives (165-168).

As an introduction to Polanyi's thought Mitchell's work surpasses anything in recent memory. While this book necessarily lacks the detail of the Polanyi biography by Bill Scott and Marty Moleski, or the constructive appropriation of Polanyi by Esther Meek, it does an excellent job of clearly exposing/summarizing major themes that reflect both the breadth of Polanyi's writings from economics to religion, as well as the center that unites his work, i.e., his theory of tacit knowing. The biographical chapter concisely puts a human face on this thinker who both biographically and philosophically crossed so many boundaries. If there is one thing that might be emphasized more, it is how Polanyi's experience as a scientist served as the paradigm for all human knowing. Nevertheless, this book provides an overview of Polanyi's work that is indispensable for newcomers.

When the book moves beyond exposition, however, it becomes less satisfying, for it oversimplifies some important interpretive issues. I highlight three: debates over Polanyi's realism, debates about his religious convictions, and his relationships with his philosophical peers. Apart from a terse footnote that acknowledges that Polanyi's realism is a contested issue, Mitchell treats it as a settled topic. One wishes that Mitchell had given more a detailed account of where the fault lines lie and why he interprets Polanyi the way he does. Mitchell does a better job with the contested matter of Polanyi's religious convictions. There at least, Mitchell not only acknowledges the conflict between interpreters, but also recounts some of the conflicting evidence (117-122). His treatment again remains incomplete, however, for this time, Mitchell is curiously content not to take a stand concerning what Polanyi's religious convictions were. One would also like for Mitchell to say more about what is to be learned from the juxtapositions of Polanyi with Oakeshott, Voegelin, and MacIntyre. Is it simply that good minds run along similar trajectories (which would seem to be the main insight to be gleaned)? For example, Mitchell interestingly attributes any disagreements between Oakeshott and Polanyi to the differences between an idealistic skeptic and a realistic post-critical thinker (142). One wonders, however, what that impasse suggests for ways to move beyond it. Each time Mitchell relates Polanyi to a contemporary thinker, he emphasizes the similarities between them and Polanyi, leaving differences unexplored, thereby foreclosing the possibility of learning from these other interlocutors.

In sum, the book is strongest when it offers an exposition of Polanyi's thought and weaker when it broaches interpretative issues. Nevertheless, since the primary purpose of the book appears to be to introduce Polanyi to those who do not know his work, it should be treated as a success. Those who are inclined to pursue Polanyi further will still learn at least some of the issues yet to be resolved. They will also be better equipped to form their own tacit integrations from the clues ably provided here.

## **II. Polanyi as a Political and Economic Thinker: Mark Mitchell's Account Walter Gulick**

While by now there are quite a number of books on Michael Polanyi's thought, no other introductory survey is quite as firmly rooted in Polanyi's political and economic thought as Mitchell's work is. Given that Mitchell is an Assistant Professor of Government, this sort of emphasis is not surprising. The concluding sentence of Mitchell's Preface captures well his overriding aim in discussing Polanyi's thought: "Polanyi should be understood as a political philosopher who rightly grasped that liberty depends on resources beyond politics" (xiii). That is, Polanyi's notions of personal knowledge and the tacit dimension, the centerpieces of much attention to Polanyi's thought, are seen by Mitchell as contributors to the social cohesion that makes liberty possible and meaningful. Tradition, the authority of a master, and commitment to the reality of moral and spiritual ideals are among the other contributors to meaningful social existence sheltering personal liberty that Mitchell highlights.

These introductory comments should not be taken to mean that Mitchell slights the epistemological or ontological dimensions of Polanyi's thought. Indeed, exposition of this dimension of Polanyi's thought forms the heart of the book. However, Mitchell is keen on tying the Polanyian revolution in knowing to the concern for freedom of conscience and avoidance of political chaos that motivated Polanyi's turn from science to economic and social theory. Thus right after Mitchell begins his work with a fine chapter succinctly describing the broad contours of Polanyi's life, he turns to the social and economic concerns that increasingly captivated Polanyi in the thirties and forties. And he concludes his study with a chapter long comparison between Polanyi's ideas and the thought of three political philosophers of the twentieth century, Michael Oakeshott, Eric Voegelin, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Political philosophy is of central importance in Mitchell's study of Polanyi.

One of the chief virtues of Mitchell's book is that it is concise and clearly written. In contrast to the struggle Polanyi sometimes had to make his ideas intelligible, Mitchell's prose is lucid – sometimes so clear as to obscure Polanyi's sensitivity to the struggle involved in discovery, the risk involved in commitment, and the feeling and passion animating our tacit impulses. I do not mean to suggest Mitchell's approach is less profound than Polanyi's, but merely to note that there is a very different feeling tone involved in reading Polanyi than there is in reading Mitchell. Focal clarity predominates in this biography of ideas, whereas in reading Polanyi one sometimes feels that not only is the tacit dimension discussed, one is immersed in it. And out of this immersion sometimes Polanyi's prose soars to majestic and unforgettable heights rarely found in any philosopher's writing.

Chapter One, in which Mitchell introduces the reader to Polanyi's life and accomplishments, gives the reader some general idea about Polanyi's work in physical chemistry, but this is not the book to turn to if one wants to learn about Polanyi the scientist. In a fairly lengthy section in his second chapter, Mitchell describes Polanyi's notion of science as "the open-ended attempt to understand reality" (43), yet it is the constraints on the open-ended search that loom largest in his account: the dependence on professional tradition and authority within the scientific community, belief in transcendent ideals that safeguard scientists from

internal or external tyranny, and submission to self-set rules of procedure and adjudication. Science in its broad role as a model of thought and procedure is highlighted in this account.

So how does Mitchell frame his discussion of the significance of Polanyi's social and political thought? He appeals to Polanyi's account of moral inversion and then characterizes "the twentieth century as the bloodiest period of utopian political experimentation the world has ever witnessed" (xi). Certainly Polanyi wanted to account for the savage tragedies of the twentieth century, and he was no fan of utopias, but with the exception of the earliest phase of Lenin's Russia, I doubt that he sees the century's miseries as deriving so starkly from the pursuit of utopias. The extreme slaughter of the world wars and communist control was carried out by power hungry manipulators of ideology and resentment – Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini – rather than by persons with utopian visions. The demonic climax of utopian thought seems rather to have occurred as the French Revolution unfurled as an expression of Enlightenment thought. Indeed, Mitchell notes (53) that Polanyi saw the French Revolution as that turning point in history where reliance on tradition and authority was overturned and replaced by a passionate desire to improve society. What Mitchell does not make sufficiently clear is that Polanyi affirmed the liberal spirit derived from the Enlightenment that Europe enjoyed in the late nineteenth century even as he argued for the importance of tradition and authority.

In the book's central chapter on tacit knowing, Mitchell's usual sure-footed exposition occasionally falters. He claims that "the tacit dimension of knowing consists in an integration of two mutually exclusive elements – the subsidiary and the focal" (76, see also 110 for a similar problematic claim with respect to comprehensive entities). No, it is the integration of subsidiaries that forms the focal. After correctly noting that integrated particulars become more than the sum of their parts, he states, "The resulting Gestalten, if integrated successfully, are entities more real than the particulars of which they are composed" (84). This is often but not necessarily the case, for the criterion of greater reality is that an entity has richer manifestations in the future than its alternative entities. The forceful members of a committee may have a far greater impact in the future than the committee of which they are integrated members. Similarly, Mitchell's shorthand summary of Polanyi's complex understanding of reality ("For Polanyi, intangibles are more real than tangibles" [84, see 114]) is flawed. Minds may be more real than cobblestones, but the planet earth is more real than an idle fantasy. Finally, Mitchell follows Polanyi in stressing the indispensability of the active element in transposing subjective passivity into personal knowledge (98), so my critique may be more properly addressed to Polanyi than Mitchell. For key components in Polanyi's description of personal knowledge are ignored by over-emphasizing active commitment: the fact that insight often comes as a gift (the Pauline emphasis on grace), and passive evocation helps bring the requisite particulars into place to be actively integrated.

Mitchell's interpretation of Polanyi is remarkably thorough for a relatively brief book. The picture that finally emerges of Polanyi is of a quite conservative political philosopher, a picture that reflects fairly on much of Polanyi's writing. But Polanyi is also in many ways a liberal thinker, one who firmly opposed totalitarian tendencies by championing free inquiry to gain knowledge and secure the good. He called for a society of explorers to uncover new truth by breaking out of unduly constraining frameworks of thought and practice. His philosophical writings, culminating in *Meaning*, celebrate free individuals in communities of inquiry exploring the meanings inherent in religion, the arts, and the literary world. Polanyi endorsement of the passion to explore, know, and create is not ignored by Mitchell, but I question whether it is given its proper weight in the book as a whole.

Yet let my final word about Mark Mitchell's book be one of appreciation for his gifted exposition of Polanyi's thought. I enthusiastically endorse his work as an introduction to Polanyi, although I would also caution novices that the book is selective as any book must be, and that there are riches in the original works that Mitchell's exposition only hints at. But as a prolegomena to Polanyi, this is outstanding work.

### III. Reviewing the Reviews

Mark T. Mitchell

This sort of exercise is bound to conjure up a variety of feelings that, while certainly natural, must not be allowed to overshadow the purpose of the exercise, which, I take it to be, the intelligent discussion of a book. First, I am grateful to Phil Mullins and the editorial board of *Tradition & Discovery* for setting up this exchange, however brief, between two reviewers and yours truly. Along with that, I am grateful for the generous way in which both Paul Lewis and Walter Gulick review my book. Their spirit of conviviality is, I think, evident and much appreciated by the author. Second, I suppose it is natural to feel a bit defensive when one's work is criticized, however mildly. One finds one's self muttering such things as "but isn't it obvious?" and "surely he doesn't think..." and "but of course that's what I meant." And finally, if, as is the case here, at least some of the criticisms hit their mark, the author is bound to experience some feelings of regret and find himself wishing he had the chance to re-write a section or to fix a sentence or to clarify a point. But alas, what is done is done and the words remain, the accurate and the clear along with those that could be improved. But with all that, it is helpful to me (and I trust to the readers of *Tradition & Discovery*) to engage the criticisms laid out by Lewis and Gulick, and I think it might be simplest if I take the reviews one at a time.

Lewis provides a summary of the various parts of my book before suggesting that the weakest parts are interpretive rather than expositional, for, in his view, some controversial points are oversimplified. Before addressing each specific point, it should be reiterated that this volume belongs to a series (ISI Book's Library of Modern Thinkers), and the intent of this series is to provide a brief, clearly written introduction to thinkers who have, for various reasons, been neglected. The intended audience is college students and other non-specialists. In that light, while there are among Polanyi scholars plenty of controversial issues, I took it as my primary role to introduce Polanyi's thought and, secondarily and where appropriate, briefly to point out unsettled issues or points of controversy. I did not want to get mired in debates that, while important to Polanyi scholars, might seem trivial or, more likely, impenetrable, to those who were encountering Polanyi's thought for the first time. With that caveat, let us turn to Lewis's three criticisms.

First, he notes that I spend little time on the much debated question of Polanyi's realism. Readers of *Tradition & Discovery* will, of course, have at least some sense of what this debate entails. It turns on the status of moral, religious, and aesthetic entities. Do these have existence independent of knowing minds and are therefore objects to be discovered? That is, are they the same, ontologically speaking, as atoms and galaxies and  $e=mc^2$  or are they ontologically dependent on the creative imagination of the knower? This debate surfaces regularly in Polanyi scholarship—for a good introduction, an entire issue of *Tradition & Discovery* was devoted to this theme (Vol. XXVI, number 3 [1999-2000]). As Lewis notes, I spend little time on this controversy. I do, for interested readers, include a long footnote indicating the parameters of the question and listing further readings on the matter. My decision to devote little time on this controversy was merely a judgment based on what I thought should be included in a work of this sort.

Second, Lewis turns to my discussion of Polanyi's religious convictions. I do, as he notes, spend considerably more time on this and attempt to show some of the different interpretations by various scholars and acquaintances. Lewis faults me for "being curiously content not to take a stand concerning what Polanyi's religious convictions were." To which I can only reply "guilty as charged." I find this question a great puzzle and, quite frankly, at the end of the day, I don't feel confident enough to take a stand one way or another. It is clear, though, that Polanyi was keenly interested in religion, specifically the Christian religion. He frequently employed religious language to make his points, and I am struck by how often his works conclude by moving right to the cusp of theology, as if to suggest that this is the direction his thought naturally goes. Indeed, the fact that theologians seem to have taken him more seriously than any other academics is instructive. Perhaps, like Kierkegaard, Polanyi wanted to think of himself as a Christian, but, at the same time, was plagued by doubts that caused him to be less than clear about the content of his religious convictions. More than that, I cannot say.

Third, Lewis argues that, in the final chapter, while I show affinities between Polanyi and several 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, I focus on the similarities and do not attend sufficiently to the differences. These differences, Lewis suggests, might help us better understand the issues at stake and formulate ways to move beyond contemporary philosophical impasses. Lewis makes a good point. More could be said about the differences. I do focus primarily on the similarities and the logic of this choice could, I think, be made more explicit if I had more clearly tied this section to the concluding pages of chapter one. There I write of Polanyi's disappointment that his work was not more widely received. He thought of himself as a lonely explorer hacking his way out of the darkness of the modern jungle only to find that precious few people had followed. I quote philosopher of science Rom Harré, an Oxford colleague, who took Polanyi's work seriously. He knew Polanyi's sense of intellectual solitude, but he believed Polanyi was mistaken. In a 1967 letter he wrote: "I have always thought, Michael, that your work lives right in the British tradition....One day I shall persuade you that you are not a lone hand but a member of what is to me a great tradition."<sup>1</sup> By focusing on the similarities with certain contemporaries, I was attempting to show, with Harré, that Polanyi was not as alone as he sometimes felt.

Walter Gulick begins by emphasizing the fact that this book is "firmly rooted in Polanyi's political and economic thought." He goes on to suggest that this is not surprising given the fact that I am a professor of government. While all that is quite true, I think my emphasis on the moral and political roots of Polanyi's non-scientific work is not merely idiosyncratic. I go to some length to show that Polanyi was motivated to move outside of the laboratory precisely because he was concerned about threats to freedom that seemed to be pressing in on all sides. He understood that the attempt to direct science was dangerous to the practice of science just as the attempt to direct an economy resulted in economic disaster. He recognized that communism and fascism were not merely another tiresome instance of ambitious men with large armies seeking to dominate the world. He saw that at their roots they were infected by skepticism as well as impelled by a moral fervor without grounding in anything other than human desire. In short, Polanyi, one is tempted to say, was wakened from his dogmatic slumber by the moral horrors created by political entities. In the preface to his 1951 collection of essays titled *The Logic of Liberty*, Polanyi notes that the essays 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." But he recognizes that a fully adequate and coherent account will have to go deeper. "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 today for the holding of our beliefs" (LL, xvii). That better foundation was finally articulated in *Personal Knowledge*.

Next Gulick points out that I am in error when I speak of 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies as utopias. He writes: “I doubt that he [Polanyi] sees the century’s miseries as deriving so starkly from the pursuit of utopias.” Instead, the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were inflicted by “power hungry manipulators of ideology and resentment.” On one level, Gulick is quite right. The motive force most evident in communism and National Socialism is not utopian but a sort of spiritual pathology. And to the degree that is the case, Gulick is correct. But further back, standing behind the pathology and subtly justifying it is, I think, the residue of utopianism without which these movements lose much of their power to compel. The dream of a world-wide communist state is, to be sure, utopian, and even if that took a backseat to the immediate task of purging dissent and acquiring the resources and buffer that dominating Eastern Europe provided, this “just-so story” in the background justified state action in the minds of both perpetrator and citizen observer. So, too, the politics of resentment that fueled National Socialism. The dream of a pure Arian race leading the world in all areas of human endeavor is utopian. From such a position it is perfectly natural to identify and seek to purge those who, for various reasons, undermine or threaten the dream. This vision—what Eric Voegelin calls a second reality—justifies, at least rhetorically (and one should never underestimate the power of rhetoric), actions of baseness and horror. At the very least, the utopian dream, perhaps only tacitly held, soothes the consciences of those carrying out the will of the madman.

Gulick notes that my exposition of tacit knowing sometimes fails adequately to express Polanyi’s views. He quotes from my book: “the tacit dimension of knowing consists in an integration of two mutually exclusive elements—the subsidiary and the focal.” Gulick responds: “No, it is the integration of subsidiaries that forms the focal.” I would say this is true in one way but not in another. Polanyi conceives of knowing as a from-to structure. We attend from the subsidiaries to the focal target. But is there something toward which we focus? If there is an external reality, the answer must be “yes.” The *meaning* of that external entity emerges when we bring to bear the subsidiary clues that constitute its meaning. Our eyes, for instance, see the face before us, but we do not recognize it as a face much less a particular face unless and until the subsidiary clues bear on it. This is, of course, an imaginary game that can never be played, for though the subsidiary clues and the focal target can be conceived distinctly, all knowing includes both concepts. But the fact remains that there exists a target the reality of which does not depend on the subsidiary clues brought to bear by the knower. So perhaps the problem here is between the meaning of the object and the brute reality of the object. There must be a target (something to be known) before subsidiaries can be brought to bear on it. And the fact that we bring these to bear on something implies that there is a something. It is the focal target that, apart from the subsidiaries, cannot be comprehended as meaningful.

Next, Gulick points out that my short summary of Polanyi’s understanding of reality is inadequate. Where I write that “for Polanyi, intangibles are more real than tangibles” Gulick points out that “minds may be more real than cobblestones, but the planet earth is more real than an idle fantasy.” Gulick is correct. My summary lacks the nuance needed to prevent the kind of absurdity that Gulick shows could result. Hopefully, though, this kind of misunderstanding is alleviated by the fact that immediately after my shorthand definition I quote a more lengthy explanation from Polanyi himself. As he puts it, “I shall say, accordingly, that minds and problems possess a deeper reality than cobblestones, although cobblestones are admittedly more real in the sense of being tangible. And since I regard the significance of a thing as more important than its tangibility, I shall say that minds and problems are more real than cobblestones” (*TD*, 33).

Finally, Gulick points out that the picture of Polanyi that emerges in my book is of “a quite conservative political philosopher.” While Gulick acknowledges that this portrayal comports fairly with much of Polanyi’s writing, he goes on to say that it is also the case that Polanyi was a liberal thinker who “firmly opposed totalitarian tendencies by championing free inquiry to gain knowledge and secure the good.” I completely agree, and while I do not want to get bogged down in a discussion of the various uses of the terms “conservative” and “liberal” I can say with some confidence that a conservative can legitimately oppose totalitarianism and champion free inquiry to gain knowledge of the true and the good. So the opposition suggested by Professor Gulick can be misleading. Polanyi, I think it is fair to say, is a classical liberal who recognized that the liberalism of, say a John Stuart Mill could not sustain itself. Polanyi styles himself as a sort of blend of Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke. He seems to understand that liberalism without restraint is as harmful as a static conservatism. Polanyi writes: “But I believe that the new self-determination of man can be saved from destroying itself only by recognizing its own limits in an authoritative traditional framework which upholds it. Tom Paine could proclaim the right of each generation to determine its institutions anew, since the range of his demands was in fact very modest. He unquestioningly accepted the continuity of culture and of the order of private property as the framework of self-determination. Today the ideas of Tom Paine can be saved from self-destruction only by a conscious reaffirmation of traditional continuity. Paine’s ideal of unlimited gradual progress can be saved from destruction by revolution only by the kind of traditionalism taught by Paine’s opponent, Edmund Burke” (*TD*, 62-3). Polanyi, it might be said, is a conservative liberal.

To conclude, as I pointed out at the beginning of the essay, this book is an introduction. Such a project provides the author with a rare opportunity to introduce others to a thinker the author believes is significant and, as in this case, one who has exercised no small degree of influence on the intellectual development of the author. As such, it is in part an expression of gratitude offered by an admirer (though we scholars are chided to keep our distance). It is also written in the hope that perhaps it will prompt some readers to take the time and make the effort to read the original. For a book like this is intended merely to serve as a signpost pointing toward a thinker whose merits deserve to be recognized and appreciated and, perhaps, taken to heart.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Polanyi Papers, [Box 6, Folder 9], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

### Notes on Contributors (continued from p. 29)

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