



# READING POLANYI'S READING: MICHAEL POLANYI'S BOOK REVIEWS

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay provides an exhaustive list (tabulated in the Appendix) of Michael Polanyi's book reviews published from 1939 to 1971. This list was compiled by careful comparative examination of existing bibliographies checked against copies of the reviews recently procured from publications. Our analysis offers a deep dive into the philosophical and historiographical significance of several selected reviews. In examining these reviews, we shed light on Polanyi's distinctive approach. Typically, his reviews are concise pieces. Instead of extensively laying out the content of the books he is reviewing, Polanyi succinctly distills their primary theses and juxtaposes or aligns them with his own perspectives. Philosophically, these reviews are a gateway into understanding how Polanyi positioned his ideas vis-à-vis several seminal thinkers of his era. From a historiographical standpoint, they chart the evolving contours of Polanyi's intellectual journey.*



## Introduction

Although they have not received much attention, Michael Polanyi wrote a number of short book reviews from the late 1930s until the early 1970s. Polanyi seems to have been an avid reader; he apparently followed new publications in certain areas of interest, and he must have liked writing reviews. Polanyi's shorter reviews should be distinguished from his several long review articles. That is, Polanyi wrote several longer essays that clearly were launched by his reading of certain books. In 1939, he first published (and this was also republished as Chapter 1 of *The Contempt of Freedom*—copy cited here) his twenty-six-page “Rights and Duties of Science” after study of J. D. Bernal's *The Social Function of Science*.<sup>1</sup> Also Polanyi, in 1941, published “The Growth of Thought in Society” (*Economica* 8, 428–456) as an extended review article that responded to J. G. Crowther's book *The Social Relations of Science*. Polanyi's response outlines his own counter account, which is a contrast to Crowther's ideas about social organization and especially the organization and promotion of science. This article is a particularly important early Polanyi philosophical statement about social and political order.

The essay following introduces and comments on what we are specifically identifying as Polanyi's short book reviews, which are themselves an interesting subclass of Polanyi's many publications. These reflections cover basic points about these reviews and provide several detailed comments on a few interesting reviews.

Included as an Appendix is a comprehensive list of the reviews with bibliographic details. Sorting out these details has been something of a challenge. Polanyi published reviews in an array of scholarly academic journals, popular magazines, and newspapers. Since some reviews should be of interest to future Polanyi scholars and students, we are recommending that the list in the Appendix be made available on the Polanyi Society website.

### An Overview

How might the collection of Polanyi's short reviews be described? Obviously, the short reviews are concise, and some are in fact extraordinarily brief, although even the shortest reviews are often strikingly articulate. The same gift for succinctly making his point of view clear that is found in *Personal Knowledge* and other books is visible in Polanyi's short reviews. The longer short reviews are about 1500 words and often appeared in academic journals and popular weeklies. About a decade after he arrived in Manchester in 1933, Polanyi wrote his first review for a Manchester newspaper. A little later, Polanyi apparently worked out an agreement to produce book notes for Manchester newspapers.<sup>2</sup> These appeared in *The Manchester Guardian* (25) and the *The Manchester Guardian Weekly* (3) from 1945 to 1956, and these abbreviated reviews are usually approximately 350 words long. But Polanyi did publish some even shorter book notes, such as his comment on the eminent botanist and Manchester University administrator Eric Ashby's *Scientist in Russia* (*The Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 20 October 1947, p. 10), which is about 150 words and signed only with his initials M.P.<sup>3</sup>

Polanyi's short book reviews are useful historical sources in the same way that his letters and archival notes are useful sources that sometimes succinctly reflect Polanyi's ideas and aspects of their development. The reviews reveal intellectual interests at a particular time as well as persisting interests. It is sometimes possible to find connections between reviews, other Polanyi projects in the same period, and what Polanyi published in essays and books in the same period. The short reviews suggest how Polanyi was working out his own philosophical perspective and saw that perspective in sympathy with or in opposition to the perspectives of others. The short reviews can thus perhaps be most aptly characterized as focused evaluative comments. That is, they are not so much general descriptive statements aiming to orient the reader to the content of a book as they are statements aimed at articulating a point of view on the perspectives developed in the book.

The short reviews reflect at least something of the contours of Polanyi's broad interests. There are reviews of books by some of the outstanding scientists in the early and middle twentieth century. There are reviews by authors of several books on theoretical biology or philosophy of biology, a long-term interest (e.g., C. H. Waddington, Russell Brain). There are reviews of books in economics, history and politics, and particularly Russian and Soviet affairs (e.g., Colin Clark, Kenneth Boulding, and Alexander Bakov). Polanyi also reviewed books by a surprising number of people whom he knew reasonably well and who might be considered intellectual friends. Polanyi's British intellectual world seems to have been one in which intellectuals often knew each other. But the reviews of books by intellectual friends are for the most part like his other reviews: they offer both sharp criticisms and compliments. There are, for example, reviews of books by Arthur Koestler, F. A. Hayek, Karl Mannheim (two posthumously published books), Alex Weisenberg (a physicist, the former husband of his niece who was at one point incarcerated in the Soviet Union and who later talked Polanyi into affiliating with the Congress for Cultural Freedom), John Middleton Murray (whom he knew in *The Moot*), and Marjorie Grene (with whom he worked closely from 1950 until his

death). Polanyi may have been at least somewhat acquainted with several others whose books he reviewed. He probably knew several of the prominent scientists whose books he commented on (e.g., Planck and Schrodinger). He perhaps knew Gertrude Himmelfarb, a historian who wrote an intellectual biography of Darwin, published in 1959, that Polanyi reviewed. She apparently lived in London and was the spouse of Irving Kristol, an important editor for *Encounter* in the mid-1950s. *Encounter* was a Congress of Cultural Freedom journal, and Polanyi was deeply involved with the work of the Congress from 1953 until 1968 and published in *Encounter* several times. Kristol was invited in 1957 to tune up the prose in the final draft of *PK*, and he did so (Polanyi to Oldham, 14 May 1957, Box 15, Folder 5, 0541, MPP; *PK*, xv).

As far as we can determine, Polanyi published forty-four short reviews between 1939 and 1971. To identify and retrieve copies of reviews, we have used several Polanyi bibliographies and a research database put together as part of the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association project that produced digital copies of material in the first forty-four boxes of the Michael Polanyi Papers (MPP). The most recent revision of the University of Chicago Regenstein Library *Guide to the Michael Polanyi Papers 1900–1975* also identifies drafts and/or published versions of thirty-four reviews. These can be easily located by using “Review” in the search box. But the guide does not identify some review materials in the MPP, probably because some materials are not well marked. Often draft copies with some notes are in MPP; in some cases, copies of printed reviews or notes about published versions are also in MPP. But we attempted to retrieve final printed versions of all reviews from periodicals and newspapers for this project focusing on Polanyi’s short reviews.

What follows are brief comments on several reviews. This discussion will hopefully encourage others interested in Polanyi’s ideas to examine more closely some of his short reviews.

### Totalitarianism

One of the odd but striking Polanyi book reviews is his 1951 comment on Hannah Arendt’s book *The Burden of our Time* (1951, later published as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) that appeared in *Time and Tide* (25 August 1951, 801–802, cited hereafter only by page number), a British weekly that Polanyi often wrote for in this period. What Polanyi effectively does in his discussion here is sketchily note some of Arendt’s ideas, but he also outlines his own ideas about totalitarianism, which can also be found in other Polanyi writings. Interestingly, the original William T. Scott manuscript of the Polanyi biography (693)<sup>4</sup> notes that the year after the publication of this review, Polanyi used some of the funds put at his disposal by the Rockefeller Foundation to bring Hannah Arendt to Manchester to give a lecture on totalitarianism.

It is not, in fact, altogether clear that Polanyi intended his comments to be regarded primarily as a book review, although he discusses some elements of Arendt’s book and identifies the book as a “permanent source of information [about totalitarianism] and a lasting source for reflection” (802). What he wrote about the book appears in a “Notes on the Way” column of about 1500 words titled “Totalitarianism.” This particular column was regularly devoted to opinion pieces by guest writers, and Polanyi’s other writings for this column clearly are lively opinion pieces.<sup>5</sup> “Totalitarianism” also certainly has the flavor of an opinion piece.<sup>6</sup> Polanyi does not mention Arendt’s book until about halfway through this “Notes on the Way” column.

He begins by suggesting that totalitarianism is like an unprecedented weather disaster that people have lived through but don’t understand conceptually: we need to be “released from a fumbling preoccupation with its particulars to face its true reality” (801). Polanyi laments the plethora of fragmentary current interpretations of totalitarianism, some of which he identifies as “altogether pointless” (801). He contends

that there seems to be no unified conception of “totalitarianism,” although this is sorely needed, and will show “Soviet Russia, Hitlerite Germany and the present regimes of countries as different as China, Albania and Czechoslovaks as several instances of one and the same system” (801). Totalitarian movements are diverse but have essentially the same structure for Polanyi, who goes on to criticize sharply what he takes to be certain perspectives on totalitarianism (e.g., economic and sociological interpretations). He particularly throws cold water on Freudian accounts, sharply questioning Fromm’s discussions of “authoritarian character,” and notes, tongue in cheek, that Geoffrey Gorer (another Freudian) has “interpreted the Great Russian character, including that of the Russian Communists, as reaction to the tight swaddling of arms and legs in babyhood” (801). When he finally does turn more directly to Arendt’s book, Polanyi indicates that he approves the way in which Arendt identifies the “essential identity” (802) of Soviet and German totalitarianism.

In the last several paragraphs, Polanyi indicates that he will “attempt here only a first personal summary” (802) of the message of Arendt’s book. What he then sketches as a “personal summary” is essentially a version of his own history of ideas account of totalitarianism as a peculiarly modern phenomenon, but he aligns his account with some Arendt discussions. He asserts that “centuries of critical thought” have led “modern man” to resent “everything not of his own making,” and from this “springs a hatred of all that is given, which, percolating into public affairs, actuates totalitarianism movements” (802). Polanyi suggests that Arendt shares this view and treats “a hatred above all of cultural and moral standards as transmitted from existing traditions” (802). The intelligentsia has come to be allied to the mob, and Polanyi quotes a line of Brecht to make his point. Lawless power tolerates no independent thought. The force of the state “is employed to discredit the very existence of a factuality which would lend a foothold to independent thought” (802). Polanyi uses several dramatic quotations from Arendt’s book to fill in the details of his “personal summary” of her devastating account of totalitarianism. Clearly, Polanyi believed that his own cultural criticism was akin to that of Arendt in important places. He, for example, approves of Arendt’s account of mass propaganda and notes that “radical skepticism results in nightmarish self-deception” (802). Polanyi summarizes Arendt’s “totalitarian triumph” as a “verdict against a world already atomized by a life ‘insistently and exclusively centred on the individual’s success or failure in ruthless competition’” (802). But he points out that she does not reconcile this account with the fact that communism has best prospered in semi-feudal regions and has not been very attractive in highly commercialized areas.

The last paragraph in Polanyi’s column is his own account of totalitarianism as the outgrowth of the critical era or movement in modernity:

I think the totalitarian movement represents the culmination of Western critical thought within a social milieu lacking the political restraints imposed by a liberal tradition. Western society lives today by rote unsupported by any philosophically respectable doctrines. Our bookish nihilism remains on paper in countries where democratic life was established long ago. But it eats its way unchecked into the masses more recently liberated from feudalism or absolutism. These masses are converted to a regime of violence by an intelligentsia spreading the same destructive analysis of man and society which remains relatively harmless in the milieu of older democracies. (802)

What Polanyi briefly outlines here fits into the context of discussion in his 1951 book *The Logic of Liberty, Reflections and Rejoinders* where he also discusses totalitarianism, liberalism, modern thought, and the emerging “post-critical age of Western civilization” (LL, 109).

### Economics, Politics, and Social Thought

Several of Polanyi’s short reviews on books about economics, politics, and social thought articulate probing and complicated questions and sometimes succinctly make complex arguments. His review of the Keynesian economist J. E. Meade’s *Planning and the Price Mechanism: The Liberal Solution* (*Economica* 16, no. 62, New Series [May 1949]: 169–170; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number) is sharply critical of what seem to be some of Meade’s basic assumptions about social order. Polanyi begins by praising Meade’s book for its temper: it treats its subject “with perfect candor and complete confidence in the reader’s good sense and open mind” (169). This even temper may, according to Polanyi, be the book’s main contribution to the solution to “our economic troubles” (169). He finds some aspects of Meade’s discussion, such as his analysis of the difficulties of some forms of state intervention and his analysis of trade union bargaining, “very illuminating” (169). But then Polanyi moves on to examine Meade’s general contention that private enterprises need to be socialized so that they operate more effectively in the interests of the community. He asks if the difficulties of assuring that nationalized industries are run effectively in the public interest are more manageable difficulties than controlling private enterprise in the public interest. He points out that Meade gives no reason for his belief that nationalization is more manageable. Meade calls for a “new breed of managers for socialised industries” (169) and suggests that such managers will be guided by “scientific principles of pricing and costing” (169). Polanyi points out that professional pride already seems to operate in private industry and asks why “nationalisation should improve the possibilities of breeding such pride” (169). He asks “how far pride can replace the profit motive” and suggests that talk about “scientific principles of pricing and costing” is “the theoreticians [sic] fancy” and could not form a basis to “measure professional achievement” (169). Further, he notes that there is “no obvious clue why managers of socialised companies could be controlled by methods different from those available for the control of managers of privately owned companies” (170). Polanyi suggests that what he generically calls “the administrative problem” needs much better “clarification” before “recommending nationalisation as a remedy for the shortcomings of private enterprise” (170). Polanyi’s reviews on economics and politics often reflect his interest in the complexity of social organization and his wariness about proposals for large changes that seem utopian.

Polanyi reviewed two of Karl Mannheim’s posthumously published books in the Manchester newspapers a few years after Mannheim’s death. From 1944 until Mannheim’s death in early 1947, Polanyi interacted with Mannheim in *The Moot* and also worked with him when Mannheim was the editor for Routledge and Kegan Paul’s International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction series (see Jacobs and Mullins 2005 for a full discussion). Polanyi and Mannheim wished to publish a collection of Polanyi essays to be titled “The Autonomy of Science.” Work on this material apparently was almost completed by early 1947, and Mannheim’s helpful editorial role appears to have been significant in bringing the project close to a conclusion. However, after Mannheim’s death, this book was never published but was reconstituted in the late 1940s with some components of the original collection retained. In 1951, Routledge and Kegan Paul published, in Mannheim’s old series, Polanyi’s *The Logic of Liberty*. Also, from 1944 until Mannheim’s death, there is a small but interesting collection of correspondence between Polanyi and Mannheim, and these letters also indicate that at least occasionally Polanyi and Mannheim met for discussions. Karl Mannheim

seems to have been an intellectual friend, many of whose ideas Polanyi believed to be misguided.<sup>7</sup> Polanyi's own developing ideas frequently seem to be formulated rather directly to counter Mannheim's views, and Polanyi's short reviews of Mannheim's posthumously published books clearly suggest the contours of some of Polanyi's criticisms of Mannheim.

In 1951, Polanyi has a book note in *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (3 July 1951, 4; quotations hereafter from p. 4) commenting on a new collection of Mannheim essays titled *Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning*. This is a collection pulled together from Mannheim's unfinished papers, and Polanyi points out that Professor Adolf Lowe, a close friend of Mannheim, fittingly "describes the work as his [Mannheim's] political testament." Polanyi contends, "Mannheim's anxiety for the future of our society besets his every thought and evokes from him a series of exhortations." He notes that Mannheim had firsthand experience (like Polanyi) fleeing the "totalitarian collapse of Central Europe," and this led him to warn "the West against relying further on a system of laissez-faire which harbours recurrent mass unemployment and generally tends to render the individual homeless by dissolving the fabric of communal ties." This condition in modernity leads human beings "to seek protection under the heel of modern tyrannies," and Mannheim's prescribed antidote for this is "a policy of democratic social planning." Polanyi approved many of the elements of British culture and character that Mannheim identified as the broad objectives of planning (e.g., peace, full employment, tolerance, concrete idealism), and he noted that Mannheim had a "sweeping mind" with extraordinary "power to assimilate and reformulate." But Polanyi is also quite clear that he regarded Mannheim's notions about "planning" as vague and not particularly helpful for persons presently interested in positively shaping post-war British society:

Yet in the end the process of "planning" on which the book dwells so persistently remains altogether obscure. All kinds of social reform that have been practised for centuries are comprised under this designation and it is not apparent what if anything is to be added to them in a "planned society."<sup>8</sup>

In 1952, Polanyi reviewed another posthumously published collection of Mannheim essays titled *Essays on Sociology of Knowledge* (*The Manchester Guardian*, 9 December 1952, 4; quotations hereafter from p. 4), and the essays in this book are all written between 1923 and 1929 when Mannheim was a young scholar. Polanyi succinctly summarizes what he regarded as the disposition of the young Mannheim and the philosophical framework that arose from it. Mannheim was "sufficiently impressed by Marxism" and was "well enough pleased with the social changes brought about by the first revolutionary period in Central Europe." He optimistically anticipated further positive changes in the decade of the twenties. Mannheim regarded the struggle of conflicting groups with "different interpretations of man and human affairs" as a creative evolutionary process through which

the "real" appeared as the proper arbiters of man's fate and even man's thought. For as these social forces mould us into what we shall be they also determine what we shall believe: and since they manifest the true meaning of history the outcome of their struggle will always be right.

But what Polanyi wants to be quite clear about is that he holds that Mannheim's youthful optimism and his philosophy have not been borne out by history: "Communism has forced the course of events to follow its own conception of historic necessity and in the act has crushed the free interplay of ideas on

which Mannheim relied.” Polanyi holds that communism has by 1952 become a “devouring fire” that makes its opponents feel guilty and afraid while filling its proponents with overweening self-confidence. This “outcome of history refutes Mannheim’s optimism.” At the same time, it confirms Mannheim’s account of the modern mind that, “having consented to regard its own mental processes as determined by the existing social structure, has renounced any standing from which it might pass judgment on the act of violence which transforms the social structure.”

### On Biological Topics

Marjorie Grene (1995, 91–95; 2002, 16) noted that soon after she began to work with Polanyi in 1950 on his Gifford Lectures and subsequently on *PK*, he requested that she find for him interesting biological literature that dissented from the Modern Synthesis, and she apparently did so. Polanyi’s thinking about biology generally seems to have aimed—as he puts it in 1952 in his talk for the Series II eighth Gifford Lecture, “Living Beings”—to raise, in somewhat new form, “the old controversy whether biology can become an exact science,” one in which “life can be exhaustively represented in physical and chemical terms” (2). In both earlier and later writing, including several of his book reviews, Polanyi challenged reductionist accounts of biology and took an interest in new ideas that seemed non-reductionist. He questioned prevailing general ideas about method and exactness in science in “The Value of the Inexact,” a 1936 Polanyi letter published in *The Philosophy of Science* (13: 233–234), and there are similar ideas articulated even earlier in some of Polanyi’s unpublished musings in his 1926 Notebook. Different disciplines of science impose different degrees of precision and demand different degrees of clarity, and this means physics is not a model for biological study (see discussion in Jacobs and Mullins 2018, 5). Several of Polanyi’s reviews suggest that he continued to monitor philosophical publications related to biology; three reviews briefly discussed below are from the period soon after the publication of *PK* in 1958. Polanyi’s criticisms of prevailing biological ideas were often aimed at what he regarded as the mechanism and reductionism in Darwinian thought and particularly in the Modern Synthesis, which overlooked matters like anthropogenesis.<sup>9</sup>

The year after the publication of *PK* was the year of the Darwin centenary, which occurred only a few years after the coming together of the Modern Synthesis, and Polanyi, in the centenary year, reviewed Gertrude Himmelfarb’s *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* in *The New Leader* (31 August 1959, 24–25, hereafter cited by page number in parenthesis). This book is an intellectual biography of Darwin that also treats Darwinism as a surprisingly successful intellectual movement. Polanyi seems to have appreciated the way in which Himmelfarb discussed Darwin’s life and his penchant for theory: “his mind ever concrete and down to earth, he is yet ever producing speculations precariously suspended on the facts” (24). He also praises Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution as “a pioneering achievement in the history of ideas” (25). He apparently approves Himmelfarb’s general portrayal of Darwinism as a “Conservative Revolution, meaning that it was the consummation of a long anticipated change” (25). Himmelfarb is an evolutionist but has questions about evolution’s explanation in terms of natural selection that Polanyi thinks are warranted. He summarizes her analysis as follows:

The theory of natural selection offered a conceivable explanation of evolution on mechanical principles, and the opening of this possibility released the long pent-up evidence in favor of evolution. Evolution triumphed; and the moment evolution was firmly accepted, natural

selection was likewise accepted as the only possibility of explaining evolution by mechanistic principles. (25)

Himmelfarb is particularly interested in the quick reception of Darwin's ideas or, as Polanyi puts it, in "how an argument which she considers inconclusive has proved overwhelmingly convincing at its own time to an initially hostile audience and has since stood up against all criticism for 100 years" (25). Polanyi sympathetically views Himmelfarb's book as appropriately capturing and questioning "the mechanical view of the universe" (25) in much Darwinian thinking. He seems particularly to have objected to what he regarded as a peculiarly narrow "mechanism" in accounts of selection in the Modern Synthesis. Polanyi ends this review by noting that Whitehead pointed out that modern people can neither live with nor without a mechanical view of the universe. He perhaps closed with this Whitehead comment in order to emphasize that "mechanism" seems both integral to biology and misused in theoretical biology.

Early in the year following the Darwin centenary, Polanyi published a review of Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* in *Saturday Review* (43, 30 January 1960, p. 21; quotations hereafter from p. 21), a popular North American weekly. This review appeared soon after an English translation was published that Polanyi points out has been widely reviewed, but Polanyi indicates that he first eagerly read the French version in 1956. Polanyi notes that he "had readily turned to Teilhard, since I reject the current genetical theory of evolution and had no doubt that Teilhard rejects it too." Polanyi speculated about the current popularity of Teilhard's book: does the current acclaim "mark the rise of a vast underground movement, sweeping aside the writers and readers who had shortly before accepted the worldwide pronouncements made on the occasion of the Darwin centenary?" He spends time in his review commenting on the apparent endorsement of the book by figures like Julian Huxley. Polanyi makes clear that Huxley's published mechanistic account of current selectionist theory is sharply at odds with views articulated in *The Phenomenon of Man*, and thus Huxley's claims about kinship between his and Teilhard's views ring false. The image of humanity in Teilhard is an image "very different from that of the repeated failures of precision in the self-copying of Mendelian genes, to which Huxley and the ruling orthodoxy attribute evolution." Polanyi summarizes the "dominant theme" in Teilhard's book as concerned with "the active striving towards ever higher, more vividly conscious forms of existence, which eventually achieves responsible human personhood and establishes through man a realm of impersonal thought." This account, of course, is a summary in which there are clear echoes of Polanyi's discussion in the final three chapters of *PK*. These chapters are the "Knowing and Being" component of his magnum opus, and here he moves from the earlier more general discussion of knowing to an account of the emergence of and knowing of living beings. That is, Polanyi outlines his own account of evolutionary emergence but also treats the responsible inquiry of human beings whom he recognizes as in the current stage of the "awakening of the world" (*PK*, 405). And Polanyi makes limited but important use of Teilhard's ideas and terminology in the final chapter of *PK*, "The Rise of Man," to sketch his own account of anthropogenesis (see especially the discussion of *noogenesis* and the *noosphere* in *PK*, 388–390).

The last component of Polanyi's review takes an interesting turn to criticism of Teilhard. Polanyi evaluates *The Phenomenon of Man* as a work whose constructive argument is not as strong as what is needed to counter the dominant mechanistic accounts in the Modern Synthesis. Polanyi suggests that Teilhard's concrete account of the evolutionary process is vague. Teilhard avoids a direct attack on "genetical selectionism" by saying little about heredity and by briefly referencing figures like Bergson, Butler, and other thinkers. Polanyi pronounces Teilhard a figure who is a naturalist and poet, one "endowed with contemplative genius"



whose purpose is “to rewrite the Book of Genesis in terms of evolution” and thus show how “the universe illuminates itself, and, through human thought, it gradually achieves communion with God.” Teilhard is a poet who “uses scientific knowledge merely as factual imagery” and thus is a figure who does not need to “argue with selectionism.” While this is praise for Teilhard, for Polanyi it is certainly faint praise. Polanyi turns again at the end of his review to the striking “contemporary success” of what he calls “Teilhard’s poetry” and asks if such poetry would have been so successful fifty years ago. He suggests that presently “there is a tide of dissatisfaction mounting up against scientific obscurantism,” and Teilhard seems to be riding this wave. Teilhard’s success has been “a little too easy.” Polanyi notes that he does not believe “the origin and destiny of man can be defined in such vague terms.” Teilhard’s text invites those with diametrically opposed views to be enthusiastic about his book, and Polanyi finds this unsatisfying. Polanyi’s review ends on a critical note: Teilhard has “avoided so many decisive issues” that his book “can serve only as a new and powerful pointer towards problems that it leaves as unsolved as before.” This final twist perhaps points to those last chapters of *PK* where Polanyi believed the decisive issues had not been ignored.<sup>10</sup>

In 1960, in *The New Scientist* (22 December 1960, 1666–1667; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number), Polanyi also reviewed C. H. Waddington’s *The Ethical Animal*. Waddington’s work as an embryologist and theoretical biologist with broader philosophical interests apparently appealed to Polanyi. Polanyi seems to have regarded Waddington’s early work on epigenesis (a term he coined) as a promising new development in theoretical biology.<sup>11</sup> In the MPP, there is a notecard under the rubric “Epigenetic landscape,” and it has a reference to Waddington’s 1957 book *The Strategy of the Gene*: “see particularly the explication of genetic assimilation on p. 167.” Polanyi included a photocopy of Waddington’s diagram “‘Organic selection’ (the Baldwin effect) and genetic assimilation,” which illustrated ways an acquired character might become incorporated in a genotype (Box 25, Folder 6, 0313-0314, MPP).

In his review in *The New Scientist*, Polanyi begins by noting that Waddington’s research on *Drosophila* had “produced adaptive changes by a process which exactly mimics the inheritance of acquired characters.” Animal behavior “contributes in a most important way to determining the nature and intensity of the selective pressure which will be exerted upon him.” This means that “mutation no longer appears then as an external force to which the organism passively submits,” and thus Waddington suggests that he has presented a “picture of evolution” that moves from “mechanism to organism” (1666). Polanyi then explains how Waddington’s basic research opened the way for Waddington’s more speculative account of ethics in human communities. Essentially, Waddington suggests that aspects of human culture such as the propensity of children to accept moral authority are in some ways an extension of sub-human evolution: “No moral precepts are innate, but the propensity to accept moral authority is. It is a product of organic evolution, its function being to mediate the further progress of human evolution” (1666). Polanyi praises Waddington for being “wide awake to the philosophical difficulties” (1666) with his views, and he cites a number of philosophers whom he thinks will object to Waddington’s views. But Polanyi clearly thinks Waddington’s purported move from mechanism to organism is not a significant transformation of mechanistic thinking about evolution:

I can see, therefore, no substantial change here from a ‘mechanical’ to an ‘organismic’ view of life. Evolution remains based on the random configuration of genes, a process essentially different from the intrinsically coherent progress of human thought. The identification of cultural history with the course of evolution remains purely verbal. (1666)

Polanyi also argues that Waddington offers logically flawed reasoning in suggesting that we can observe as a scientific fact a moral belief that is binding on us:

We can observe and appreciate other people's moral beliefs as we do their health, but we can neither observe nor appreciate our own moral beliefs; we can only bear witness to them and hold them—more or less firmly, more or less faithfully. (1066)

Polanyi's review did in fact get Waddington's attention. On 31 December 1960, Waddington wrote Polanyi a note of thanks for the review, but in this note he clarifies his position regarding "the relation between genetic assimilation and the older ideas which regard evolution as based solely on 'random mutation' and stochastic processes":

I do not want in any way to deny that the basic mechanisms of mutation operate in a stochastic manner; but the point is that my genetic assimilation process occurs, as it were, on top of them, at a higher level of integration. (Waddington to Polanyi, 31 December 1960, Box 5, Folder 14, 1424, MPP)

Waddington added, "genetic assimilation does not contradict random mutation, but, I think, shows how it is incorporated into a more precisely-operating evolutionary mechanism" (Waddington to Polanyi, 31 December 1960, Box 5, Folder 14, 1424, MPP).<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

The philosophical and historiographical significance of Michael Polanyi's short reviews is noteworthy. These concise reviews reveal Polanyi's continuous and dynamic dialogue with preeminent thinkers across diverse fields. He engaged with notable figures such as Friedrich von Hayek, Ortega y Gasset, Max Planck, Erwin Schrödinger, Hannah Arendt, Karl Mannheim, Bertrand Russell, Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Oppenheimer, Teilhard de Chardin, and C. H. Waddington. Polanyi navigated the complex intellectual currents of the mid-twentieth century, and his short reviews contributed to shaping his evolving philosophical ideas. We have here only briefly and concretely discussed a few Polanyi reviews treating books in political and cultural history, economics, and philosophical biology; however, we suspect that the larger collection of short reviews outlines a broader narrative reflecting Polanyi's intellectual development. We invite others to look closely at the comprehensive set of materials that we have pulled together in the Appendix.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Note Polanyi's comments after mentioning and referencing what he calls Bernal's "able and powerful treatise" (*CF*, 1): "My purpose in this essay is to examine briefly the Marxist claims, and those of Professor Bernal in particular, for a radical reconsideration and readjustment of the duties of science, and the assurances, accompanying these claims, that they will not impair the vital rights of science" (*CF*, 2).

<sup>2</sup> The number of reviews in the Manchester newspapers suggests this. Also, a 4 August 1949 letter from Polanyi's secretary to the editor of *The Manchester Guardian* (available in Box 32, Folder 7, 0389, Michael Polanyi Papers [hereafter MPP]) attempts to unscramble a snafu concerning the numbering system for a submitted Polanyi review. This letter suggests that Polanyi had probably earlier worked out some kind of arrangement to do reviews for the newspapers.

<sup>3</sup> Polanyi was almost certainly acquainted with Ashby; see the comments below on Polanyi's reviews of other books whose writers Polanyi knew. Even in this very short review, Polanyi managed to raise a pointed question about Ashby's book, which

he characterized as “both critical and sympathetic towards the Soviet Union” (10). Ashby noted that the imprisoned Russian biologist Vavilov (who was critical of the Marxist theory of genetics) died in prison, and Polanyi asked in his review’s final sentence, “Should these events not have affected more deeply the rest of the picture?” (10). Polanyi monitored and publicized matters concerned with Vavilov’s persecution and the Lysenko affair. He saw in these matters serious philosophical and social policy questions. Polanyi has an extended discussion in “The Autonomy of Science,” which originated as a 1942 address that was published in 1943, 1945, and again in 1951 as the fourth chapter of *The Logic of Liberty*, “Self-Government of Science” (see particularly *LL*, 58–67). Polanyi’s *Manchester Guardian Weekly* book note comment on Ashby’s book elicited a Letter to the Editor from Ashby that was published in *The Manchester Guardian* (1 November 1947, p. 4) along with Polanyi’s response to Ashby’s letter. But Polanyi’s rather lengthy and passionate response to Ashby (available in draft form in Box 31, Folder 4, 0026-0027, MPP) was foreshortened by the editor.

<sup>4</sup> The preceding reference is to the full first draft of the Polanyi biography (293,000 words) written by William T. Scott with assistance from Monica Tobin and Ann Scott. This draft is in the William T. Scott Archives at the University of Nevada, Reno. The only changes made in this first draft of the manuscript by Marty Moleski, S.J. (who began work on completing the biography near the end of Scott’s terminal illness) were the regularization of paragraphing, punctuation, spelling, and references. Although the University of Nevada, Reno, Library staff is still organizing the William T. and Ann Scott materials, inquiries can be directed to Jacque Sundstrand, Archives/Manuscripts Librarian ([jsund@unr.edu](mailto:jsund@unr.edu)).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, another Polanyi “Notes on the Way” column and discussion of this opinion piece in articles by Tartaro 2019 and Mullins 2019 in [Polanyiana 2019, 1–2](#).

<sup>6</sup> Polanyi’s discussion of John Middleton Murry’s *The Free Society* was also a “Notes on the Way” column in *Time and Tide* (13 March 1948, pp. 265–266). This short comment also seems to be both a review and an editorial.

<sup>7</sup> Nye suggests that Mannheim’s views are the “shark cruising beneath the surface waters” (Nye 2011, 280) in Polanyi’s *PK* discussion (*PK*, 264) of a constructive sociology that avoids objectivism, determinism, and relativism. Mannheim may also be the shark beneath the surface in Polanyi’s later criticism of the relativist fallacy in evaluating historical action in the final chapter of *The Study of Man* (*SM*, 88). In general, Nye suggests that Polanyi misunderstands Mannheim’s views (Nye 2011, 279–285). Perhaps this is the case. But it is clear, as the Polanyi-Mannheim correspondence shows, that Polanyi believes he has a different social vision than Mannheim; Polanyi suggests that Mannheim misunderstands the critical role of public liberty in social life. Mannheim is thus confused about the role of planning in society. Planning cannot produce freedom but is by its nature an alternative to a liberal society with supervisory authorities that rely on the exercise of public liberty by persons. See the discussion in Jacobs and Mullins 2005, 21–25.

<sup>8</sup> See Jacobs and Mullins 2005, 23–29, for discussion of several related relevant topics: Polanyi’s account of law and planning and Polanyi and Mannheim’s discussion in April 1944; Polanyi’s April and early May letters to Mannheim; the Moot notes on Polanyi and Mannheim’s discussion of planning in the June 1944 Moot meeting. Polanyi’s comments on planning in this book note are a concise replay of this earlier history.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth recalling that Polanyi’s early biological education was in Hungary in his medical training; it seems likely that the German biological tradition was more important in this context, and the German appropriation of Darwin was not identical to the English appropriation. See Lenoir (1982) for an illuminating discussion of nineteenth century German biology, which “was based squarely on the unification of teleological and mechanistic models of explanation” (Lenoir 1982, ix). That is, in the German biological tradition, “the imputation of purposiveness of biological organization was not regarded an embarrassment but rather an accepted fact, and...the principal goal was to reap the benefits of mechanistic explanations by finding a means of incorporating them within the guidelines of a teleological framework” (ix). This general description seems to fit Polanyi’s approach to biology reasonably well.

<sup>10</sup> See Mullins 2003 on Polanyi’s and J. H. Oldham’s discussion of Teilhard and the limited use of Teilhard in the revised final chapter of *PK*. This essay also notes Polanyi’s several other post-*PK* references to Teilhard.

<sup>11</sup> There is a footnote in the *PK* discussion of morphogenesis and embryonic tissues to two Waddington publications; see *PK* 356, note 2. Polanyi perhaps knew Waddington from the time in which they both gave talks in a post-war BBC broadcast “The Challenge of Our Time,” which was published in 1948 as a collection of short essays titled *The Challenge of Our Time* that included Polanyi’s “Can Science Bring Peace?” and Waddington’s “Can Science Be Reconciled with the Humanities?”

<sup>12</sup> In a follow-up letter (Waddington to Polanyi, 3 January 1961, Box 6, Folder 1, 0011, MPP), Waddington advised Polanyi that he had just read and enjoyed “Beyond Nihilism.” He suggested that social science research (which is “still naturalistic”) will “provide us with a picture of man” that shows that “morality is a part of his being,” and this insight will stem the slide into moral inversion. He suggested that his book *The Ethical Animal* basically implies that morality is natural and social science may help humans understand and improve morality, and this may be an antidote to the cultural ravages of scientism.

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## Appendix: List of Michael Polanyi Reviews

The following list of forty-four short reviews, published between 1939 and 1971, was compiled by Alessio Tartaro and Phil Mullins as described below.

Initially, we consulted the major bibliographic resources treating Michael Polanyi’s works. These include

- “A Bibliography of Michael Polanyi’s Social and Philosophical Writings,” compiled by Richard L. Gelwick and available in Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat, eds., *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1968), 432–446.
- *A Classified and Partially Annotated Bibliography of All Forms of Publications, Sound Recordings, Internet Documents, etc. by and about the Anglo-Hungarian Philosopher of Science Michael Polanyi*, compiled by Maben Walter Poirier (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2002). This bibliography is currently out of print.
- “Bibliography of Michael Polanyi’s Publications,” compiled by Harry Prosch and available in Harry Prosch, *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 323–346.
- “Bibliography of Works by Michael Polanyi,” compiled by William Taussig Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., and available in William Taussig Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (OUP 2005), 327–350.
- The *Michael Polanyi Papers 1900–1975* (MPP) is an archival collection of materials held by Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library. There is an online “finding guide,” *Guide to the Michael Polanyi Papers 1900–1975*, at <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.POLANYI>. This finding guide has an electronic search function. Forty-four boxes of the MPP have been digitized by the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association (MPLPA) centered in Budapest, Hungary. The MPLPA also produced a database on materials in the forty-four digitized boxes of archival materials. While the materials of the MPP and the resources for using the MPP are not strictly bibliographic resources, these resources have been used to helpfully supplement the major published Polanyi bibliographies noted above.

Upon examination, we have found that none of the published bibliographies are wholly accurate or exhaustive as far as Michael Polanyi’s reviews are concerned. Meticulous cross-checking and consulting the MPP has however allowed us to curate what we believe is the most comprehensive bibliography of reviews available to date. It is worth noting that drafts of some reviews, often with helpful notes about publication, were located in the digital copy of the MPP specifically in boxes 26 to 34.

Using the interlibrary loan system, we have acquired digital copies of reviews in order to validate information gleaned from the reference bibliographies. This project has been untiringly supported by the good work of two reference/interlibrary loan librarians from Missouri Western State University, Jennifer Galloway and Jackie Burns. For this we are very thankful.

With digital copies in hand, we have corrected any errant bibliographic records, refining details in existing bibliographic entries. In some instances, we amended publication dates or page numbers in some bibliographies. On occasion, we discovered and added the published title or newspaper headline for a review along with the title of the book being reviewed. Our exploration within the MPP boxes led to the identification of a few reviews previously unknown that apparently were never published.

We hope that the list below will prove useful to Polanyi scholars. Inquiries about particular reviews are invited; simply e-mail queries to both Alessio Tartaro ([alessiotartaro@gmail.com](mailto:alessiotartaro@gmail.com)) and Phil Mullins ([mullins@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:mullins@missouriwestern.edu)).

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