

A Note on “Perils of Inconsistency” and “The Eclipse of Thought”

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Below is a link to the Liberal Currents web site copy of Chapter 1, “The Eclipse of Thought,” from Harry Prosch and Michael Polanyi’s 1975 book *Meaning* (cited hereafter as M). Prosch acknowledged in *Meaning* (M, xiii), that this opening chapter is an adapted version of part of Polanyi’s 1951 collection titled *The Logic of Liberty, Reflections and Rejoinders* (cited hereafter as LL).¹ Liberal Currents suggests that “The Eclipse of Thought” is virtually a reprint of Chapter 7, “The Perils of Inconsistency” (LL, 93-110), with a nine-paragraph introduction at the beginning of the original essay. While this is correct, a few interesting details are worth noting.

These nine opening paragraphs of “The Eclipse of Thought” are an interesting addition which links the subject matter of “Perils of Inconsistency” to subject matter treated in Polanyi’s *Meaning Lectures* (1969, 1970 and 1971) and similar themes treated in both other early and late Polanyi writing. In fact, these inserted nine paragraphs themselves offer a very concise and complicated argument and this is somewhat atypical for the opening of most Polanyi essays and book chapters.

The Bibliographical Note in *Meaning* (M, 227) suggests that a 1967 unpublished University of Toronto Polanyi lecture titled “Sixty Years in Universities” (available in the Michael Polanyi Papers--see References) is also a source for Chapter 1. Some wording in these nine leading paragraphs does echo “Sixty Years in Universities.” “Sixty Years In Universities” was a Polanyi address in which he reflected on the university he knew before World War I and the university he saw in the sixties and which he anticipated would be, in the future, changing to become more like the university he earlier knew. There is a slightly redacted archival typescript of “Sixty Years in Universities” which indicates it was retyped June 19, 1974. In one section, this address does make a vague general reference to behaviorism which Polanyi frequently criticized. But in the discussion in the fourth paragraph of “The Eclipse of Thought” there is a bit of word play with the title of a B. F. Skinner book. There is in fact a footnote in this paragraph of “The Eclipse of Thought” (M, 217) to Skinner’s *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* published in 1971.

In addition to the nine paragraphs at the beginning, there are a few other changes in “The Eclipse of Thought” worth noting. Following the new paragraphs at the beginning of “The Eclipse of Thought,” the original opening paragraph of “The Perils of Inconsistency” as well as the first sentence of the original second paragraph have been adapted in the *Meaning* version. In the opening paragraph of “Perils of Inconsistency,” Polanyi straightforwardly announced his original topic as concerned with “intellectual freedom” (LL, 93). He contended that the “doctrine” (LL,

¹In the late spring of 1951, *The Logic of Liberty* was first published in London by Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. and shortly thereafter by the University of Chicago Press. Although the texts are the same, the order and numbering of the preliminary material differs. References below to the Preface use the numbers in the Routledge text.

93) concerned with intellectual freedom, which has been handed down, was “intrinsically inconsistent” (LL, 93); the contemporary “fall of liberty” (LL, 93) is the result of this problem. Thus “freedom of thought has destroyed itself” since “a self-contradictory conception of liberty” has been pursued to its “ultimate conclusions” (LL, 93). In other words, the original essay’s first paragraph explained what the title of the original essay summarized in a short phrase (i.e., “perils of inconsistency”) and pointed to what the detailed argument of the essay intended to make plain. What the nine new paragraphs and the adaptation of the original opening paragraphs of “Perils of Inconsistency” do is shift the original focus of “Perils of Inconsistency” somewhat to a broader matter captured by what the new title “The Eclipse of Thought” summarizes as the present state of affairs. The new title ties together matters concerned with “intellectual freedom” and its recent history and “the achievement of meaning” (M, 5) which is the matter to be treated in *Meaning*.

The original wording of a few sentences in the last two paragraphs of “Perils of Inconsistency” on the instability of modern thought have also been slightly modified in “The Eclipse of Thought.” These changes seem primarily to smooth out the prose at the end of “Perils of Inconsistency.” Similarly, “The Eclipse of Thought” includes some footnotes which were omitted in “Perils of Inconsistency,” although some of the references were in the original essay.

Perhaps the most interesting difference between “Perils of Inconsistency” and “The Eclipse of Thought” is that a paragraph near the end of “Perils of Inconsistency” was omitted from Chapter 1 of *Meaning*. In this paragraph, Polanyi suggested that “we have thus begun to live in a new intellectual period, which I would call the post-critical age of Western civilization. Liberalism today is becoming conscious of its own fiduciary foundations and is forming an alliance with other beliefs, kindred to its own” (LL, 109). This is an early Polanyi comment about the dawning “post-critical age” and his conclusion that “the critical enterprise which gave rise to the Renaissance and the Reformation, and started the rise of science, philosophy, and art, had matured to its conclusion and had reached its final limits” (LL, 109). Polanyi’s claim here that modern liberalism is becoming aware of its “fiduciary foundations” fits with his cursory remarks in the Preface of *The Logic of Liberty*: material in this collection acknowledges “the fiduciary foundations of science and thought in general” and Polanyi links this with his rejection of the “individualistic formula of liberty” which “could be upheld only in the innocence of eighteenth-century rationalism, with its ingenuous self-evidences and unshakable scientific truths” (LL, viii). In sum, the omitted paragraph from near the end of “Perils of Inconsistency” suggests how this essay and *The Logic of Liberty* foreshadow Polanyi’s work on his Gifford Lectures (1951-1952) and *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958/1964, hereafter PK) where Polanyi has much more to say about the scope of “fiduciary foundations.” In fact in the 1964 Torchbook Edition Preface to *Personal Knowledge* (PK, ix-x), Polanyi draws attention to “fiduciary” as the key term marking the book’s philosophical “task of justifying the holding of unproven traditional beliefs” (PK, ix) and comments on the many entries under “fiduciary program” which appear in the Index (PK, ix). He notes that the “fiduciary element is intrinsic to

the tacit component of knowledge” (PK, x), which his later thought after the publication of *Personal Knowledge* explores more fully.²

Except for “Perils of Inconsistency,” the chapters in *The Logic of Liberty* are Polanyi essays from the forties, most from the late forties and most had been published in some form earlier. But it seems likely that Polanyi wrote “Perils of Inconsistency” after he began in earnest, as the Polanyi biographers report (Scott and Moleski, 204), pulling together this collection in the summer of 1948. His invitation to give the Gifford Lectures came on May 23, 1947 and these lectures were originally scheduled to begin in the fall of 1949 (Scott and Moleski, 203) so Polanyi was working on his Gifford Lectures when he was working on *The Logic of Liberty*. In a footnote at the end of Chapter 5 of *The Logic of Liberty*, Polanyi provides the date of November 1949 for “collecting my essays into this volume” (LL, 85). His undated letter to Edward Shils (in the archival Edward Shils Papers) which almost certainly was written very late in the year in 1949 comments that he has sent off to the University of Chicago Press and Routledge “the manuscript of my collected essays under the title ‘The Structure of Liberty’ about a week before Christmas” (see References). However, *The Logic of Liberty* was not actually published until the late spring of 1951. Apparently after Polanyi submitted *The Logic of Liberty* material to the publishers, he decided to publish, in the Autumn 1950 issue of *Measure: A Critical Journal* (Polanyi, 1950), an essay almost identical to Chapter 7, “Perils of Inconsistency,” under the title “Logic of Liberty: Perils of Inconsistency.”³

The additions to and deletions from “Perils of Inconsistency” in “The Eclipse of Thought” were almost certainly the work of Harry Prosch since the Prosch and Polanyi collaboration on *Meaning* occurred at a late stage of Polanyi’s life when he was increasingly frail and unable to work.⁴ Polanyi asked Prosch to help put together *Meaning* in May, 1972, but most of the work on

²For an expanded discussion of Polanyi’s use of “fiduciary” in his Gifford Lectures, *Personal Knowledge* and other writing from the late forties and fifties, see the online-only “Introduction to the Gifford Lectures” (Mullins, 2016, 3-6) on the Polanyi Society web site listed in References.

³This 1950 publication is very likely connected with the fact that Polanyi in the spring of 1950, after the manuscript of *The Logic of Liberty* had gone to press, was a visiting White Professor at the University of Chicago. Robert M. Hutchins, the Chancellor, invited Polanyi to come to the University of Chicago and Polanyi’s lectures apparently drew on the forthcoming *The Logic of Liberty*. Hutchins was also the editor of the new (the first number was in Winter, 1950) but short-lived journal *Measure*, and two people in the program of the Committee on Social Thought (David Grene and John Nef) with which Polanyi was affiliated were on the editorial board of *Measure*.

⁴In “Harry Prosch: A Memorial Re-Appraisal of the *Meaning* Controversy” (Mullins and Moleski, 2006), a *Tradition and Discovery* article published soon after Prosch’s death, there are many details about the collaboration on *Meaning*; these are only briefly summarized here. This essay—one which aimed to honor and set the record straight about Prosch’s late work with Polanyi—uses the Polanyi-Prosch archival correspondence to tell the story of Polanyi’s decline and Prosch’s increasingly important role.

the book occurred from February, 1973 through the fall of 1973 with the contract for the book signed in July 1974. Although Polanyi originally planned to work on the opening chapters while Prosch worked on the later chapters on “works of imagination” (i.e., the Meaning Lecture materials), this plan was abandoned. In 1973, Polanyi slowly recognized that he was no longer capable of doing any serious writing, and Prosch eventually took over Polanyi’s original projected work of putting together the introductory chapters of the book. Prosch finished the first draft of the opening three chapters of *Meaning* in the fall of 1973 after he already had completed his work on other sections. The archival Polanyi-Prosch correspondence in this period makes clear that by the fall of 1973, if not before, Prosch recognized that he was dealing with a respected friend and collaborator whose capacities were seriously diminished.

References

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[Liberal Currents Copy of “The Eclipse of Thought”](#)

