

An Introduction to “The Authority of the Free Society”

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“The Authority of the Free Society” was published in *The Nineteenth Century and After* (146: 347-360) in July 1949. It is closely akin to Polanyi’s essay “The Logic of Liberty, Perils of Inconsistency” which appeared in *Measure, A Critical Journal* (1:348-362) in Autumn, 1950. This later version reappeared as Chapter 7, “Perils of Inconsistency” in Polanyi’s 1951 collection of essays titled *The Logic of Liberty, Reflections and Rejoinders* (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd). Several Polanyi essays published earlier in the forties such as “The English and the Continent” in December 1943 (*The Political Quarterly* 14: 372-381) also are more loosely akin to “The Authority of the Free Society.” All of these essays reflect that Polanyi is, in the forties, working out an historical account of the way ideas developed in modern Western society. He is interested in the ways in which ideas undergird science and society and particularly in the ways in which ideas changed or were differently appropriated in different societies. Ultimately, Polanyi’s historical narrative describes how modern ideas have undermined and misrepresented science and have at the same time undermined the foundations of democratic societies and led to violence, nihilism and totalitarianism in the twentieth century.

“The Authority of the Free Society” is a stage on the way to Polanyi’s broader criticism of modern culture and the articulation of his constructive alternative philosophical perspective set forth in his 1951 and 1952 Gifford Lectures (two series of ten lectures titled “Commitment, In Quest of a Post-Critical Philosophy”) and his 1958 book *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, based on his Gifford Lectures. When this essay was published, Polanyi was struggling to put together his Gifford Lectures which he was invited to give in May, 1947 but whose actual delivery he delayed several times. “The Authority of the Free Society” already reflects Polanyi’s own “post-critical” turn as a thinker working to understand and address the grave problems of modernity and reassert the centrality of belief. In his Preface of *The Logic of Liberty* (cited hereafter as LL), the collection, whose seventh chapter closely resembles the narrative set forth in “The Authority of the Free Society,” Polanyi says the recent essays in his collection “represent my consistently renewed efforts to clarify the position of liberty in response

to a number of questions raised by our troubled period in history” (LL, vi). He suggests that he has “reconsidered one aspect of liberty after another” and “each in turn revealed its vulnerability” (LL , vii). He notes that it seemed premature to cast the material in *The Logic of Liberty* “into a mould of a comprehensive system” (LL vi). This “cannot be attempted without establishing first a better foundation than we possess today for the holding of our beliefs” (LL vi). The final summary comment at the end of “The Authority of the Free Society” asserts that “the truths that the fathers of freedom could blandly assume to be self-evident will henceforth have to be formulated in explicit professions of beliefs.” In sum, this essay leads toward what Polanyi in the fifties called his “fiduciary program” which sets forth his constructive alternative to the critical philosophical tradition that he held is undermining science and political culture in the West.

“The Authority of the Free Society” is posted on the Polanyi Society web site for non-commercial use with the permission of Dr. John Polanyi, literary executor for Michael Polanyi.

[Link for the text of “The Authority of the Free Society”](#)