

The following review of Drusilla Scott's *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi* (Book Guild, 1985; Eerdman, 1995), is extracted from Phil Mullins, "On Reading Polanyi and Reading About Polanyi's Philosophical Perspective: Notes on Secondary Sources," *The Political Science Reviewer* (Vol. XXXVII) 2008: 158-240. This lengthy review article treats six books which are sometimes used as introductions to Michael Polanyi's thought. Some comments in the extract refer to other books treated in the longer review article.

multi-level is a stark contrast to the reductionism often promulgated in modern and post-modern culture. In his penultimate chapter, Allen treats Polanyi's political philosophy and his interest in modern problems of meaning. Polanyi's political philosophy emphasizes that "a free society needs a commitment by its members to truth and a mutual respect for each other's self-dedication."⁷¹ Although his comments are very few, it is clear in his remarks on Polanyi and the problem of meaning that Allen, like the writers of almost all of these introductions, is especially interested in religion and theology. Allen hints at a few criticisms of what he takes to be Polanyi's overly this-world account of religion. At the end of Allen's book is a two-and-a-half page orientation (now somewhat dated) to Polanyi scholarship and a brief bibliography. He comments on books and authors who have written about Polanyi or who have applied Polanyi's post-critical perspective.

Although my overview of Allen's book, like the book itself, has been concise, the reader should not conclude that this introduction is a second-class effort. It is simply a very tightly wrought introduction, and perhaps no Polanyi scholar is better able to be brief than Richard Allen. Of course, the contrast is sharp between, for example, a loquacious introduction like that of Drusilla Scott, who projected a modern "everyman" as a reader, and Allen's book, whose publisher projected an audience with no time for details. Allen's *Polanyi* is a very basic orientation to Polanyi's post-critical perspective, and that is just what this Claridge Press series intended.

Michael Polanyi and Common Sense: Drusilla Scott's *Everyman Revived*

The late Lady Drusilla Scott met Michael Polanyi in 1960 and became a friend in the last sixteen years of his life; she was a leader in the British Polanyi-studies group Convivium (now merged with the largely North American Polanyi Society) that published a small journal (of the same name), which often featured her insightful reflections on Polanyi's philosophical work. Her book,

Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi, was first published in 1985 by the Book Guild. After it went out of print, it was reprinted by Eerdmans in 1995 and is still readily available.⁷² This is the most down-to-earth introductory book, providing an overview of Polanyi's ideas. Scott is perhaps the Polanyi interpreter most attuned to the difficulties of reading Polanyi. As she says, "Polanyi is advocating such a U-turn in accepted ways of thinking that the experience of reading him can be disorienting."⁷³ Scott writes clearly, is imaginative (but sometimes digresses), and her informal prose often aims to be witty. She says in her preface that she tried to "introduce some of his main ideas as simply as possible so as to show their value and meaning in today's world"; those who are *Everyman's* heirs, who now "urgently want some light on the real world, should claim Polanyi as our philosopher."⁷⁴ Scott thus links Polanyi's views with the recovery of common sense, which was one way Polanyi himself discussed his philosophical objectives. Scott's book has a certain British charm and is full of illustrative stories; she draws skillfully not only from the play *Everyman*, but from a wide range of contemporary writers—philosophical, scientific, and literary.

Her opening chapter, "The Power of Ideas," makes the case that Polanyi valued ideas and came to believe that a misunderstanding of science, woven with a particular modern philosophical and cultural narrative, led to the violence in the twentieth century that Polanyi knew firsthand. Scott discusses Polanyi's notions about a "disastrous dissonance"⁷⁵ at work in modern culture, which combines extreme critical lucidity and an intense moral conscience to produce nihilism. Polanyi argued that the hope of early Enlightenment ideas got lost as later generations succumbed to a materialist outlook obsessed with objectivity. Scott traces the development of Polanyi's understanding and criticism of modernity in terms of his own experience as a *fin de siècle* Hungarian-born, refugee research scientist who eventually turned from physical chemistry to economics, social science, and philosophy as he sought to understand his own culture. There is a rather good short biography in this chapter that shows how

important problems and conclusions for Polanyi are set by his personal experience. With verve, Scott introduces Polanyi's themes and weaves these into a story of his experience, carefully choosing quotations from various Polanyi writings to make her case eloquently, as she often also does in succeeding chapters.

Each chapter after the first begins with a few italicized sentences that link the chapter's discussion to the characters in the medieval play *Everyman* and that provide a summary of what the chapter explores in Polanyi's philosophy. Although, as a reader, I was at first puzzled by this section, I came to appreciate this succinct way in which Scott focuses her discussion. The second chapter is a brief plunge into the history of modern ideas (some of which were touched on in the first chapter) that sets forth more concretely the problematic that Polanyi addresses in his philosophy. This chapter also focuses more directly on the main trope used in this book: Scott employs the story in *Everyman* as an envelope within which to present a reasonably well-rounded account of Polanyi's philosophical perspective. This old play still has an "emotional force" today because it is an "agonized search for values that can stand and endure in the face of suffering and death"; it is a play about "the urgent need of man to know something sure about the meaning of his existence . . ." ⁷⁶ Scott's comparison focuses on the old authoritarianism of the Roman Catholic Church and the similar new authoritarianism of scientism (i.e., the misread tradition of science) which systematically undercuts the person as a skilled and responsible holder of knowledge at home in the world. Polanyi's work was to re-equip human beings to trust their own faculties, which the era of critical thought has taught them to distrust. The liberation of the early critical era brought a new authoritarianism which included "the rift between Knowledge and *Everyman*."⁷⁷ The picture of the world and the person that developed from the seventeenth to the twentieth century was one in which mind and matter were split and ultimately the motion of matter was what counted. What evolved was "a picture of the universe as a vast assembly of atoms moved relentlessly on its path by impersonal inevitable forces,"

and this picture “seized the imagination of man and dominated it.”⁷⁸ Therefore, when “Knowledge turned her cold and analytic eyes on to Everyman, and saw that he too was part of the world of matter, made of atoms, obeying the same laws as the planets, she could not recognize her sister Good Deeds nor her friend Everyman.”⁷⁹ Scott’s reading here of the development of the history of ideas is not a close reading, but she provides a creative and concise sketch of Polanyi’s critique of modern culture against which Polanyi’s constructive philosophical ideas began to develop. Polanyi “set about building a truer picture of how Everyman knows his world, how he can justify his claim for the validity of ‘personal knowledge,’” and this makes a great difference “in bringing hope, reality and responsibility back to Everyman.”⁸⁰

After the introduction of Polanyi and Polanyi’s cultural criticism in the first two chapters, Scott turns in the next three chapters to an elaboration of the constructive themes in Polanyi’s thought that counter the prevailing cultural narrative. The third chapter focuses on discovery as the paradigm case in Polanyi’s model of knowing and the key to his understanding of science.⁸¹ Scott here introduces the process of scientific research in terms of the pursuit of intellectual beauty, which she portrays as a reinstatement of Beauty in Everyman’s world.

Discovery is the most illuminating element in science, yet it has been ignored by philosophy of science. However, Polanyi—himself a practicing scientist—made discovery central. Scott’s discussion of discovery unfolds as a brief comparison of the views of Bertrand Russell and Karl Popper with the ideas of Polanyi. Russell focused on observation, deduction, and induction, while Popper relegated the creative element in developing scientific ideas to psychology and focused attention on questions of validity. Polanyi, however, emphasized first the matter of choosing a good problem (which relies upon highly personal skills of seeing). Polanyi also assigned importance to intellectual passions, imagination, and the discoverer’s “dim sense of direction,” which is guided by “intimations of reality, indicated by scientific beauty.”⁸² Scott provides a fair summary of Polanyi’s account of discovery

seen starkly against the backdrop of Russell's and Popper's views. There is perhaps a bit too much effort in her discussion to link Polanyi's ideas with a popular book of the eighties, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Readers today will likely not know Pirsig, and I don't believe Pirsig ever truly had a grasp of many of the issues that Polanyi sought to address. However, with her many examples from other writers, Scott does show that other thinkers share Polanyi's view of the importance of discovery. Finally, included in this review of Polanyi's perspective on discovery is a succinct but lucid summary of Polanyi's interesting effort to show the difference between accounts of discovery in modern science from before and after the act of discovery.

The fourth chapter, titled "Tacit Knowing," follows from the extended discussion of discovery as the central puzzle of science. Because discovery is central to knowing, it is necessary to reconceive the nature of knowledge and the knowing process. As his philosophical ideas matured, Polanyi developed such a reconception which he eventually called the theory of tacit knowing. Scott lays out the main parameters of the theory, which she portrays as "the rehabilitation of Five Wits."⁸³ Not all knowledge is explicit, exact, and testable, Polanyi argues, but all that is explicit, exact, and testable relies upon tacit elements used by a knower to attend to what is of interest. By carefully discussing skills, Scott shows how Polanyi broadens and reworks the traditional understanding of acquiring and holding knowledge. She discusses Polanyi's interest in the practical, skillful, and bodily elements of all knowing by reinterpreting Gestalt ideas and part-whole dynamics:

We focus on the whole by not attending to the parts, or as Polanyi says by attending *from* them *to* something else which is their joint meaning. We integrate the parts into the whole not by a reasoning process but by a sort of bodily skill, which is so much part of our make-up that we are usually not aware of it—you don't think of it as a skilled performance when you recognise your child among a crowd!⁸⁴

Scott ably shows how Polanyi binds together perception and other kinds of knowing and how tacit knowing in human beings is linked to the capacities of other animals and to evolutionary history. Seen against the standard account of knowing, Scott thus summarizes the nature of Polanyi's personal knowledge: "There is then no finished certainty to our knowledge, but there is no sceptical despair either. Through all our different kinds of knowledge there is a reasonable faith, personal responsibility and continuing hope."⁸⁵

"Reality," Scott's fifth chapter, sets forth the several important aspects of Polanyi's metaphysical realism. Against the backdrop of a positivistic view of science, Polanyi reasserted that "science progresses by guessing at aspects of reality indicated by clues in what is seen and heard, just as we guess that certain sounds indicate the presence of a real burglar and go to look."⁸⁶ Polanyi's realism is commonsensical, but, more importantly, it focuses attention on the knower's commitments, passions, and tacitly held skills. Polanyi repudiated an impersonal and rule-bound method as the path to discovery, and instead developed a portrait of the scientific discoverer as a responsible, committed person, making full use of tacit powers. Doubt, Polanyi argued, is not the royal road to truth, but responsibly held belief, which one puts forth with universal intent, serves as the key to all human understanding of reality. However, Polanyi's notion of "reality" is not a simple notion that focuses on tangibility: "we recognize something as real because it draws us on, makes us feel an obligation to search and discover, rewards us by revealing more and unexpected but recognisable meaning."⁸⁷ Minds are, for Polanyi, more richly real than cobblestones, and we can know rich realities only by deeply dwelling in their particulars. As Scott puts it, Polanyi's "idea of *indwelling* gives a firmer outline to the idea of *commitment*. If we indwell in the clues we perceive, using them as an extension of ourselves and a tool for discovering more, we have to commit ourselves more to them."⁸⁸ All in all, Scott's seamless discussion of the several components of Polanyi's realism is one of her best chapters.

Scott follows chapter 5 with "Truth and the Free Society," a

discussion that complements her chapters on discovery, the theory of tacit knowing, and Polanyi's metaphysics. She outlines Polanyi's broader account of the operation of the larger scientific community situated in a free society. Polanyi was an astute and articulate scientist who recognized the social aspects of science. Particularly those influenced by early Polanyi texts like *Science, Faith, and Society* sometimes see Polanyi as an early sociologist of science. Although I, like Scott, think this is an inadequate description of Polanyi's approach, it is true that Polanyi carefully laid out an account of the scientific endeavor as a cooperating community of independent researchers pursuing truth. Polanyi's examination of science emerged in the thirties and forties against the backdrop of Marxist-influenced movements to plan science. Scott skillfully sketches how Polanyi emphasized the independence of the scientist and the authority of scientific opinion operating across the many neighborhoods of science. She lays out Polanyi's view of how professional standards operate within science and how what Polanyi later called "conviviality"⁸⁹ provides a necessary but often overlooked element in the scientific community which is committed to the exploration of an unfolding reality. She ably summarizes Polanyi's account of science as a global self-governing "form of spontaneous organization,"⁹⁰ an organization that in early modernity had to reject the authority and tradition of the church but now has (and should acknowledge) its own indispensable tradition. All of these broader social themes in Polanyi's thought come together in a circumspect discussion in Scott's chapter.

What Scott does less convincingly in chapter 6 is show concisely how Polanyi's vision of the scientific community also yielded what he regarded as a liberal vision of society grounded in certain notions of freedom. There is no doubt that Scott appreciates the larger political philosophy Polanyi articulates, as shown by her discussion of Polanyi's reflection on the important role of a rich variety of independent associations in the state. But she might have here discussed Polanyi's notions about "public liberty" and "transcendent ideals" as a way quickly to get to the heart of his political vision. Her comparison of the evolution of scientific

views and legal precedents is helpful, but I expect that many readers will find strained her extended effort to compare Puritan ideas about liberty of conscience and what she regards as Polanyi's sense of the "scientific spirit."⁹¹ Also disconcerting at the end of this chapter is the several-page retelling and analysis of the story in Selma Langerlof's novel *Jerusalem*. Scott construes the story to be about "moral discovery"⁹² and "moral community,"⁹³ but most readers are apt to find it a long stretch to see this story as an analog pulling together Polanyi's "account of how scientific discoveries are made, and how they relate to the tradition and authority of the scientific community."⁹⁴

Scott's seventh chapter, "Moral Inversion and the Unfree Society," circles back to explore in more depth Polanyian themes concerned with the destructive currents in late modern culture, themes introduced in the opening two chapters. Polanyi's analysis of the troubled modern mind pointed to the fusion of two kinds of convictions: from a misleading theory of knowledge that came with the rise of modern science, we inherited a far-reaching skepticism that undercuts all moral ideas and judgments; but eighteenth-century scientific rationalism also brought a "giant wave of man's unlimited moral aspirations which, turned from its Christian channel, poured like a destructive torrent through the channels of rationalism."⁹⁵ Scott rightly emphasizes how Polanyi again and again in his analysis of late modern culture hammers home his conclusions about the explosive, destructive impact of this combination of extraordinary contempt for moral values and excessive moral passions fueling a Utopian perfectionism. She outlines Polanyi's case that England and the United States were spared the full impact of "moral inversion" because there "the inversion is limited to vocabulary and logic but not put into practice; men talk a language of materialism, behaviourism, value-free sociology or utilitarianism, and yet continue in practice to respect the principles of truth, justice or morality which their vocabularies anxiously deny."⁹⁶ Scott then reviews Polanyi's numerous criticisms of Marxism and Soviet institutions and practices. She ends this chapter with an analysis of a speech by a

British foreign secretary who typifies what she regards as the muddled moral, epistemological, and metaphysical ideas underlying late-twentieth-century British policies. Scott tries to refine and update some of Polanyi's cultural criticism but she gets somewhat carried away with her analysis of the British foreign secretary's speech; she sometimes sounds much more conservative than Polanyi himself.

Polanyi held that scientism often misrepresented complexity for it contended that ultimately everything, including the human being, could be exhaustively described in terms of physical and chemical laws. In her eighth and ninth chapters, Scott summarizes and applies Polanyi's case against this and other forms of reductionism. Polanyi countered a one-level mechanical account of entities with a hierarchical view that emphasizes how higher level principles of organization operate in margins left open by lower levels of control. Lower levels of control determine the conditions of success and failure in an entity, but they do not control the nature of higher level principles that can come into play. Polanyi used this hierarchical account not only to counter what he regarded as the reductionism of behaviorism but also to criticize Neo-Darwinian arguments that focus too narrowly on variation and selection. Polanyi contended that discussions of evolution needed to make a place for the emergence of greater organizational complexity from the margins left open by lower levels of control. Ultimately, Polanyi held that a theory of evolution that cannot account for the emergence of human beings who are creatures inquiring about evolution is a failure. Polanyi tried to link the structure of evolutionary emergence with his account of tacit knowing. He makes a case that his understanding of the hierarchical structure of entities is a parallel to his account of knowing in terms of subsidiary and focal elements. These matters are the most difficult elements in Polanyi's philosophical perspective. Scott does a reasonably good job (although sometimes I think she makes things too simple) in summarizing the main ideas in this difficult terrain. She does a better job in her ninth chapter, "Mind and Body," where she presents Polanyi's criticisms of behavior-

ism and his effort to institute a starting point for philosophical reflection that does not accept an unbridgeable ontological chasm between mind and matter. Here she introduces some of the discussion in the sixties between Polanyi and Marjorie Grene, Polanyi's closest philosophical supporter after 1950, but also one of his best critics.⁹⁷ Although Polanyi disagreed, Grene thought Polanyi's eagerness to defeat behaviorism led him back to a mind-body dualism. There are a number of things that Polanyi scholars have debated and still debate; Scott's discussion of this topic of debate should be interesting to even those readers using Scott's book to locate the general contours of Polanyi's philosophical perspective.

From discussions in earlier chapters, Scott pulls together in her tenth chapter a rich description of Polanyi's account of a person. She argues that in Polanyi's reinterpretation of science, centered on discovery, there is a recovery of the person as more than material and mechanical: "Polanyi's ideas of tacit knowledge and the many-level world transform the possibilities for recognising persons in their full humanity, without rejecting the scientific knowledge of the physical world."⁹⁸ Polanyi's person is an engaged, changing, and unique figure grounded in the natural and historical world; Polanyi gives us an account that "extends biology into theory of knowledge."⁹⁹ Polanyi's person is an inquirer, one who dwells in in order to break out, a responsible figure that makes choices, respects the achievements of all living things, and accepts kinship with them: "Polanyi set human personhood in a cosmic perspective of evolution, seen as emergence and achievement."¹⁰⁰

The final two chapters of Scott's book, although interesting, are likely of limited value to readers seeking a basic introduction to Polanyi's ideas. These chapters do treat some themes in Polanyi's writings, but they are a rather indirect discussion. The eleventh chapter, "The Poet's Eye," begins with a comparison between the literary critic F. R. Leavis and Polanyi, and then introduces Polanyi's late writing treating symbol, metaphor, art, myth, and religion, which is the main topic. Certainly Scott is right

in pointing out that late in life Polanyi tried to extend his earlier philosophical ideas to say more about meaning that he regarded as related to but somewhat different than meaning in science. She says Polanyi's argument was "sometimes ambiguous and not entirely convincing"; yet she thinks Polanyi's efforts to identify a "special sort of truth"¹⁰¹ are interesting and important. This launches her discussion of Polanyi's misreading of Coleridge's claim that appreciating art requires the willing suspension of disbelief. She argues that Polanyi has pulled Coleridge's idea out of context; what Coleridge has in mind is actually close to what Polanyi pointed to in analyzing the meaning of poems, works of art, myth, ritual, and religion as requiring "transnatural" integrations; such artifacts are marked by "incompatible" particulars.¹⁰² Scott outlines some of the distinctions that appear in *Meaning*, co-authored with Harry Prosch, about meaning-making in these domains that Polanyi tried to work out in the last years of his life. In the last section of the chapter, there is an extended comparison of Polanyi's life and developing outlook and that of Wordsworth. Both took on a mission to "'unstop our ears' and save us from the crippling restrictions"¹⁰³ of an overly critical and analytical philosophy. Scott contends what "Polanyi worked out intellectually Wordsworth worked out poetically."¹⁰⁴ In this discussion, Scott shows that she is a sensitive Wordsworth reader; but, in the final analysis, Polanyi is not comparable—at least to this Polanyi reader—to an English Romantic poet.

The concluding chapter of Scott's book, "A Meaningful World," is one of the longest chapters in the book. It treats what clearly is of special interest to the writer, what she calls "the religious dimension of Polanyi's thought,"¹⁰⁵ about which she acknowledges there has been much wrangling in Polanyi scholarship. Early in this chapter Scott sorts through some of Polanyi's ambiguous comments about religion and offers some conclusions. She clearly wants to claim Polanyi as, somehow, a religious thinker. She holds that "the discovery of meaning in our most vital experience of the world is a function of religion,"¹⁰⁶ and insofar as Polanyi was a thinker interested in recovery of meaning, he should

be recognized as a religious thinker. Certainly the things Polanyi said over the course of his life reflect his interest in religion, his sense that his philosophical perspective opened new ways to think about and accept religious meaning, and his great hesitancy about establishing for himself a religious affiliation. Scott suggests that Polanyi's insights about science can lead to new approaches to religion. Polanyi emphasized the priority of belief and the way in which understanding follows and relies upon beliefs in science and religion. Also, she stresses that religious understanding is a cultivated skill and that Polanyi suggested that tradition and authority are important in both science and religion. She insightfully emphasizes that Polanyi's implications for religion focus on "the breaking out and exploring aspect of religion"¹⁰⁷ and that these implications too often are underplayed by religious institutions and religious thinkers. She notes that Polanyi brought science and religion together in his writing as he re-conceived the character and destiny of human persons situated in nature and history and seeking meaning. Scott introduces the continuing scholarly discussion about *Meaning*, Polanyi's final book, written with Harry Prosch (treated below). What sort of account of religion is here? Although it is clear which side of the debate Scott favors, she unfortunately, does not do a good enough job of laying out the issues so that one not already familiar with them could follow. But she does a nice job of discussing what she calls Polanyi's "supra natural" (rather than supernatural) orientation, which focuses upon "the natural world revealing a meaning."¹⁰⁸

In sum, *Everyman Revived* is a competent and readable introduction to Polanyi which sometimes digresses. On the whole, Drusilla Scott interprets Polanyi's thought sensitively as a literary intellectual particularly interested in the bearing of his ideas on culture, the arts, religion, and theology. Perhaps it is also true, as one reviewer of another introduction to Polanyi says of Scott's book, that it "goes too far in the direction of popular presentation."¹⁰⁹ If so, it nevertheless, is a popular presentation that fulfills the promise of her subtitle: Scott succeeds in showing the common sense of Michael Polanyi.