

The following review of *The Tacit Mode: Michael Polanyi's Postmodern Philosophy* by Jerry H. Gill 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 this extract may refer to other books treated in the longer review article.

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Gelwick's final two chapters round out the discussion by reviewing Polanyi's main themes and commenting on his influence. "Invitation to Explorers" surveys the ways in the mid-seventies that Polanyi's heuristic philosophy was reforming outlooks in different areas. Gelwick briefly comments on how those using Polanyi's ideas were recasting issues in different areas of philosophy and in discussions in religion and art. Of particular value is Gelwick's discussion of the several essays in *Intellect and Hope*, an important Polanyi *festschrift* from the late sixties that included reflections by several prominent thinkers. The last chapter in *The Way of Discovery* pulls together the themes developed in earlier chapters. Although the discussion here would lose some of its resonance, this chapter could be read independently as a very quick introduction providing an account of the shape and significance of Polanyi's heuristic philosophy. Gelwick reviews Polanyi's analysis of the crisis of modern culture and Polanyi's constructive philosophical effort to heal the split between the knower and the known; Polanyi aimed to recover a rich account of the person as engaged in the world. Polanyi confronts materialist reductionism and modes of thought that bifurcate matters into fact and value. Polanyi made clear, Gelwick says in conclusion, that "scientific discovery, instead of expunging our personal beliefs and our participation in the major tasks of knowing and shaping our planetary destiny, calls us to resume the pursuit of truth inexhaustibly."<sup>144</sup> As I noted at the beginning of the discussion of *The Way of Discovery*, this is the oldest of the Polanyi introductions, but it remains, still today, a particularly well-rounded and articulate presentation of Polanyi's main ideas.

**Polanyi and Post-Modernism; Jerry Gill's *The Tacit Mode***  
Jerry Gill's *The Tacit Mode*,<sup>145</sup> published in 2000, provides a discussion of Polanyi, as its subtitle—*Michael Polanyi's Postmodern Philosophy*—implies, that is pitched at a somewhat different audience than the introductions treated above. *The Tacit Mode* is not, strictly speaking, a basic introduction to Polanyi's thought, like the Mitchell, Allen, Scott, and Gelwick books. Nevertheless,

at least the first section (i.e., part 1, which is four chapters, 88 of the 183-page, eight-chapter book) may be a helpful for readers with certain contemporary interests and background who seek an orientation to Polanyi's perspective. Although Mitchell's introduction does touch upon post-modernism, Gill's book much more directly situates his discussion of Polanyi's thought in the context of the history of philosophy as that is understood at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.<sup>146</sup>

This book is part of a SUNY series, edited by process theologian David Griffin, that focuses on "revisionary, constructive or—perhaps best—reconstructive"<sup>147</sup> post-modern thought. Griffin's short essay introducing the series discusses the appropriateness of dividing post-modern thought into "deconstructive" and "reconstructive" camps and the importance of taking seriously "reconstructive" thinkers. Gill's introduction takes up where Griffin leaves off by proposing that Polanyi's thought was clearly an effort to reconstitute modern philosophy, reorienting it from the course along which it has proceeded since Descartes. Polanyi used the term "post-critical" in *Personal Knowledge* to signal his reconstructive intent and what Gill wants to do is to contextualize Polanyi's thought within the broader perspective of the history of modern philosophy. Gill aims to identify where Polanyi's "post-critical" thought fits into the landscape of the modernism–post-modernism discussion. All of the introductory works discussed here, at least indirectly, do treat Polanyi's criticisms of modernism and his constructive alternative vision, but—with the exception of Mitchell's brief discussion—none of these books so directly treat post-modernism and the very recent history of Western philosophy.

One might describe the perspective of Gill's book in another way, so as to reveal its limitations. The other reviewed books show how Polanyi's ideas emerged in the context of his life as an émigré scientist engaged with the issues of his day. Early on, Polanyi struggled to articulate a vision of science that is not centrally controlled, and this broadened into a philosophical vision of liberal society. Polanyi eventually turned to epistemology. Al-

though his epistemological model is always bound up with his interest in scientific discovery, it is also concerned with the larger project of human inquiry. Gill's discussion does not focus directly on this personal, historical, developmental account of Polanyi's thought. What he does, instead, is fit Polanyi more narrowly into the context of the modern history of philosophical ideas. This is an important contribution, but it makes his book on Polanyi one that is better suited for readers steeped in recent philosophy.

How is this book organized? It is broken into two major sections with four chapters in the first division and four in the second. Gill suggests that he does not intend to treat "Polanyi's reconstructive approach to postmodern philosophy" in a "step-by-step, chapter-by-chapter format,"<sup>148</sup> but that his purpose is to "treat the main emphases of Polanyi's thought around two major foci: locating a fresh axis (part 1) and tracing the patterns thereof (part 2)."<sup>149</sup> Since the first part of his discussion could serve as an introduction to Polanyi for those concerned with the history of philosophy and conversant with themes in the literature of postmodernism, I will focus on part 1 with only a brief overview paragraph on part 2.

Taking up the "fresh axis" discussion, chapter 1 provides a quick summary of the history of modern philosophy that outlines the approaches and problems of Descartes, Hume, and Kant. This opens up Gill's following chapter 2 discussion of "Polanyi's treatment of the structure of human experience with an eye to overcoming the errors of modernist philosophy."<sup>150</sup> Gill's discussion focuses on what he terms the "awareness dimension" and the "activity dimension,"<sup>151</sup> and this leads to an exploration of Polanyi's understanding of, and emphasis upon, the body as central to all human experience, especially to that domain of experience called cognition. Gill aims, in his dimensional analysis of Polanyi's philosophical approach, to show how Polanyi avoids the more typical modernist approach to experience in terms of realms or levels. His dimensional analysis focuses on matters of integration and interaction among the various aspects of human experience. As he notes, Polanyi is interested in the nature of meaning, and

complex meaning is “best understood as a function of the interaction among simultaneous and interpenetrating *dimensions* of reality.”<sup>152</sup> Gill contrasts Polanyi’s own philosophy with modern critical philosophy—which is “reductionistic or dualistic” while “a dimensional model allows for a greater richness, on the one hand, and the essential wholeness of human experience on the other hand.”<sup>153</sup> The “activity dimension” of experience in Gill’s account falls somewhere along “a continuum between the bodily and conceptual poles.”<sup>154</sup> Thus, “in Polanyi’s scheme of things, the intersection between the awareness and activity dimensions, with their respective poles, gives rise to yet a third dimension or continuum, namely that of cognition,”<sup>155</sup> which Gill explores in a subsequent chapter. At the end of his second chapter, however, what Gill also underscores is “the crucial role of the body in the shaping of our interaction with the world.”<sup>156</sup> Every reader of Polanyi must appreciate the way in which Polanyi conceives of embodiment and the integrative activities of persons. Gill does a solid job here of describing Polanyi’s ideas about indwelling and integration, although in my judgment he overestimates the influence of Merleau-Ponty upon Polanyi. What, then, in the final analysis are the virtues and limitations of Gill’s “fresh axis” discussion as an approach to Polanyi’s thought? It is a creative overview of Polanyi’s perspective that serves reasonably well to show how Polanyi’s views differ from much of modern philosophy. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Gill quotes generously from Polanyi texts, this is a rather abstract account. Gill provides an architectonic approach to Polanyi, which he lays out in a diagram; this may be helpful for some Polanyi readers, although it will likely confuse others.

The third chapter in *The Tacit Mode* shifts to a discussion of Polanyi’s analysis of the structure of knowledge. Here Gill examines the “interplay between the explicit and tacit components of human experience.”<sup>157</sup> He provides a solid discussion of how Polanyi challenges the traditional modernist account of knowledge as limited to what Polanyi terms explicit knowledge. Gill explains Polanyi’s attack upon the philosophical ideal of objectiv-

ity and his effort to make clear the pervasiveness of personal coefficients in all knowing. Tacit knowledge is the “anchor or tether for explicit knowing” and therefore “we always know more than we can tell.”<sup>158</sup> Gill clearly elucidates Polanyi’s case for the logical priority of tacit knowing. But he emphasizes that “Polanyi is not saying that every claim to tacit knowledge is to be accepted as veridical, any more than every claim to explicit knowledge is to be accepted as true.”<sup>159</sup> Testing tacit knowledge is, however, different than testing explicit knowledge. The case that Gill makes for Polanyi’s approach to knowing is one that emphasizes that “knowing can and must have a place to begin that neither guarantees certainty nor leads to subjectivism.”<sup>160</sup> Gill calls this place where Polanyi anchors knowledge (i.e., tacit knowing) “its ‘axis’ rather than its foundation because the latter term conjures up an image that inherently requires us to ask what it is that the foundation itself rests upon.”<sup>161</sup> Polanyi, in Gill’s view, thereby avoids the problems of both foundationalism and relativism.

In the last section of this third chapter, Gill shows that Polanyi’s model of cognitivity is a model that overcomes the challenge of skepticism: “Polanyi has placed the body, together with its inherent cognitive capacities, at the center of human existence and has, thereby, eliminated the need for a bridge between the knowing agent and the world.”<sup>162</sup> Gill argues that skepticism in the form of cultural and epistemological relativism is contradicted by the very act of assertion by its proponents. The doubt of skepticism is a parasitic activity that “presupposes that which it claims to undermine.”<sup>163</sup> Polanyi has sharpened this perspective to show that at the heart of meaningful cognitive activity lies universal intent. He accepts that there is a world to be known and that human beings can trust their powers of perceptual and logical discernment. This is what it means to root cognitive activity in “acts of tacit embodiment in which we necessarily know more than we can tell.”<sup>164</sup> But cognitive activity also has a social dimension. Thus Polanyi emphasizes that human individuals explore the cosmos as members of particular cognitive communities. Communities of interpretation like those found in science

are necessarily conservative. In the case of science, Polanyi describes that conservatism in terms of the objectification of certain values (scientific plausibility, scientific value, and originality) that in fact are uneasy bedfellows. Gill argues that Polanyi carefully threads his way between the challenging poles of late modernism and post-modernism found in relativistic deconstruction, on one hand, and forms of authoritarianism, on the other. Polanyi is both a fallibilist and a thinker committed to the claims that human beings can know the truth and that the pursuit of the truth is an important communal endeavor.

Gill's fourth and last chapter in the opening section of his book is an effort to look at Polanyi's "reconstructive approach to postmodernism philosophy"<sup>165</sup> in connection with deconstructive post-modernism, represented by Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault. While it seems likely that some Polanyi scholars would be very uncomfortable with some of the affinities Gill finds between these three and Polanyi, I find Gill's treatment to be reasonably balanced. This chapter may be of particular interest for the beginning Polanyi reader who happens to be well acquainted with Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault. Gill argues that "[b]oth Polanyi and the deconstructivists are concerned to identify and overcome the cognitive limitations inherent within the modern way of thinking, limitations that result from the presuppositions inherited from the overall philosophical posture taken by early Western thinkers. . . ."<sup>166</sup> Gill spends about twelve pages setting forth what he regards as the basic elements of the post-modern critique put forth by his three representative deconstructionist thinkers. All, in one way or another, offer what Gill calls a "critique of fixed meaning."<sup>167</sup> All three take an approach to "truth" and "knowledge" that insists upon "the 'situated' nature of all human cognitive activity."<sup>168</sup> These figures all offer a "critique of monolithic systems,"<sup>169</sup> whether these are philosophical, economic, or other grand schemes. Gill's discussion makes good use of carefully chosen quotations to make his case. Nevertheless, it seems to this writer that he sometimes stretches too far to defend the sweeping nature of some deconstructive claims. In Gill's view,

“deconstructive thinkers conceive of their project as positive. Deconstruction is not equivalent to nihilism.”<sup>170</sup> Here again, especially with Foucault, Gill seems to have to reach to make his case. Following his effort to lay out basic parameters of deconstructive modernism, Gill turns to what he calls “a Polanyian critique”<sup>171</sup> that shows ways in which Polanyi’s criticism of modernism is complemented by constructive philosophizing that recovers some of the values of the Enlightenment and tempers some of the views of deconstructive postmodernists. Gill argues, for example, that Polanyi’s discussions of language, tacit knowing, and meaning do not, like the deconstructivists, “overshoot the mark.”<sup>172</sup> “The dynamics of tacit knowing preclude the possibility that any symbol can be thought of as attached to any referent in a permanent manner. Just as reality continuously reveals itself, so do linguistic meanings.”<sup>173</sup> However “the same tacit dynamic makes it clear that meanings cannot be open-ended in the absolute sense that seems to be implied by deconstructive analysis.”<sup>174</sup> With the deconstructionists, “Polanyi would agree that social and political considerations factor into the discovery and formulation of knowledge,” but Polanyi takes a quite different stand regarding the “proper interpretation of the significance of such factors.”<sup>175</sup> Polanyi holds that “the simple fact that cognitive activity is a social phenomenon does not entail that it is bogus or that its results are unreliable.”<sup>176</sup> Gill stresses that Polanyi’s emphasis upon “universal intent” ultimately allows him to speak about “truth” and “knowledge” in a way that simply is not possible within the deconstructive framework.

In summation, the opening four chapters of Gill’s book provide an overview of Polanyi’s basic ideas about tacit knowing; this overview is packaged in Gill’s own framework constructed upon Polanyi’s “axis” for approaching cognitvity, and this framework is helpfully cast against the background of modern and post-modern philosophy.

I don’t find the second part of Gill’s book (the last four chapters and the conclusion) particularly useful as an introduction to Polanyi, but it does follow out elements of the opening

section. The last section is cast as “tracing the patterns of various aspects of our common search for knowledge”<sup>177</sup> in science and political theory, in understanding language and promoting education, and in art and religion. What Gill wants to do in these chapters is comment on directions Polanyi’s ideas, and particularly his theory of tacit knowing, have led or seem to point. He discusses Polanyi’s account of science but notes that Polanyi’s views are rather individualistic and were formulated before the era of “big science.” He discusses Polanyi’s political philosophy and finds Polanyi too conservative; the post-modernist critique, by way of contrast, is more keenly attuned to “the sociopolitico-economic dimensions of human cognitive activity.”<sup>178</sup> Gill thoughtfully raises questions about Polanyi’s ideas, but he sometimes also shows, in my view, that he has not fully digested all of Polanyi’s early ideas about important matters such as public liberty, the structure of liberal society, and the importance of transcendent ideals in the face of materialism. His chapter on language and education is interesting, especially his discussion of Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, but the discussion is, by Gill’s own admission, primarily about his own philosophy of education that grows out of Polanyi’s basic insights. Likewise the chapter on art and religion is what he calls an “interpretative effort”<sup>179</sup> to trace the implications of Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing for aesthetics and religion. Much of the discussion here is an abstract version of some of Polanyi’s late ideas; clearly, these are matters that interest Jerry Gill as a philosopher. The last substantive chapter in Gill’s book is a quick romp through some of the literature on Polanyi, with comments about ways Gill’s own account complements or differs from what others have said about Polanyi’s thought. Compared to the opening section of the book, part 2 is a much more eclectic discussion in which Gill uses Polanyi to launch his own treatment of issues. But the opening section of *The Tacit Mode* could, for the reader with the right background and interests, provide an interesting orientation to Polanyi as a figure to be seen within the horizon of recent discussions of post-modernism.