

The following review of Mark Mitchell's *Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2006), a recent introduction to the thought of Michael Polanyi, 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 2008 review article treats six books which are sometimes used as introductions to Michael Polanyi's thought.

"A Brief Symposium on Mark Mitchell's Michael Polanyi" with comments by Walter Gulick and Paul Lewis and a response from Mark Mitchell appears in *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, 34:2 (2007-2008): 30-38. This is available online (scroll to p. 30) at <https://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/TAD%20WEB%20ARCHIVE/TAD34-2/TAD34-2-fnl-pg26-38pdf.pdf> .

**The Newest Introduction to Polanyi:
Mark Mitchell's *Michael Polanyi***

A very competent new introduction to Polanyi's thought is Mark Mitchell's *Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing* (2006), a readable book of less than 200 pages.¹² In his preface, Mitchell provides a clear and succinct summary of the themes he develops. He offers a balanced discussion of Polanyi as a broad-visioned thinker whose career as a scientist led him into the "planned science" controversy of the early twentieth century as well as into economics. Polanyi develops an account of the "necessary foundations of a free society,"¹³ but is drawn toward study of how the modern conception of knowledge contributes to the political and moral problems of the twentieth century. Polanyi works out a new "post-critical" conception of knowledge that allows contemporaries to acknowledge the reality of moral and spiritual ideals. Mitchell suggests that Polanyi's many philosophical pursuits can all be linked to his effort to "re-establish a legitimate grounding for liberty" and thus that Polanyi is a "political philosopher who rightly grasped that liberty depends on resources beyond politics."¹⁴

Mitchell's strikingly good opening chapter provides a biographical discussion that nicely contextualizes Polanyi's life and work. He shows that Polanyi's move from medicine to physical chemistry, to economics and political philosophy, to epistemology and cosmology, has plausibility. He emphasizes that Polanyi was an outsider and that both the creativity of his contributions and the reactions to his work have been colored by this. Mitchell makes good use of the new Polanyi biography¹⁵ as well as other sources, including some of the Polanyi archival material at the University of Chicago. The only quibble I have with Mitchell's biographical account is that he likely misreads Polanyi's 1919 Roman Catholic baptism as an attraction "toward an institution that could provide the resources for comprehending the moral and spiritual vacuum of Europe."¹⁶ More likely, the baptism was largely the pragmatism of a young scientist fleeing Hungary for Germany, the scientific capital of the world. Polanyi, like many

other secular Jews, took the precaution of getting baptized.¹⁷ But Mitchell does appropriately emphasize Polanyi's stress upon tradition and authority and his interest and sympathy for religion. Mitchell comments on Polanyi's earliest non-scientific writing in the period of World War I and on Polanyi's rise within the scientific community. At the end of his opening chapter, Mitchell sums up how he understands Polanyi's philosophical perspective: "Confronted with the alternative of Enlightenment rationalism (which has clearly failed to live up to its promises) and what has come to be called postmodernism, Polanyi's theory of knowledge neither succumbs to rationalist hubris nor retreats into the hovel of postmodern despair."¹⁸

In his seminal second chapter, "Economics, Science, and Politics," Mitchell outlines and links Polanyi's contributions in these three important areas. There is a review of Polanyi's criticisms of movements for centralized planning from the thirties forward. In a nutshell, here is Polanyi's objection to centralization: "A centralized system . . . is predicated on the belief that the central authority is capable of gathering and assimilating all available information about every aspect of the economic system and then making decisions based upon that information."¹⁹ Polanyi's solution to the problem was to recognize and support "polycentricity" which is a system "that operates according to the mutually adjusting actions of independent participants."²⁰ Mitchell notes that Hayek later borrowed Polanyi's term "spontaneous order." All in all, Mitchell does a solid job of showing how Polanyi applies his thinking about polycentricity to economics. He shows how Polanyi's empirical study of the Soviet economy made clear that it did not abolish the market mechanism but merely modified it. He makes clear that Polanyi is not merely a *laissez-faire* supporter: "Polanyi was a fierce opponent of collectivism, but he was not a *laissez-faire* libertarian. On the contrary, he accused both libertarians and collectivists of being wrongly suspicious of government intervention in economic matters."²¹ Polanyi's position is that "[c]apitalism is the only viable option, but this does not imply that the state has no role beyond enforcing contracts and

preventing fraud. On the contrary, the state can work (albeit at the margins) to ensure that the market operates as effectively as possible.”²² Mitchell nicely summarizes Polanyi’s ideas about how the government might influence the money supply to affect the employment rate. This is a synthesis of Keynesian and monetarist economics that went largely unrecognized by economists of his time.

One of the most interesting discussions in this chapter is Mitchell’s account of the differences between Michael’s and brother Karl Polanyi’s views. Mitchell concisely outlines Karl’s account of modern society and the market system and then compares this with his younger brother’s views. The main difference, as Mitchell summarizes it,

lies in their respective accounts of the cause of the current crisis. . . . Karl suggested—and here we can identify Marx’s influence on his thought—that the woes of the twentieth century resulted from a faulty economic structure. These obstacles could be overcome if the right institutions were altered better to reflect human nature. . . . Michael . . . ultimately located the problem in the spiritual and moral vacuum that resulted from a deficient conception of knowing—one that denied the very possibility of spiritual and moral reality. This denial was the product of a view of reality that was both skeptical and materialistic. Michael Polanyi called this union “objectivism.”²³

All in all, Mitchell, in a very few lucidly written pages, brings together in this chapter, under the rubric of “economics,” some of the most important ideas that Polanyi developed in the thirties, forties, and fifties. I would supplement Mitchell’s account in this section in only one modest respect, and Mitchell in fact does later make clear that he appreciates this point: I think it might be helpful for those unfamiliar with Polanyi to see in this early discussion the nuances in Polanyi’s discussions about liberty. Too often Polanyi’s ideas about liberty are taken to be largely the by-product of his study of economics. Certainly Polanyi’s visits to the

Soviet Union, his attunement to Soviet oppression (particularly of scientists), and his strong “intellectual commitment to liberty motivated his long struggle against totalitarianism.”²⁴ But Polanyi’s support of liberty is also of a particular kind. Polanyi supports what he sometimes termed “public liberty,” as opposed to “private freedom.”²⁵ That is, Polanyi offers a sophisticated argument about complex social organization that Mitchell has in fact well laid out; but, as a consequence of his support of polycentrism, Polanyi is not a garden-variety libertarian opposing totalitarianism. His early writing provides a liberal vision of an evolving, pluralistic society in which human beings take on responsibility within the many specialized communities of interest like science and the law, and the work of such sub-cultural groups benefits society as a whole. This vision is an application of Polanyi’s support of polycentricity as it pertains to moral and intellectual rather than primarily economic matters. His most important insights about and commitments to liberty do not focus on private liberty or personal freedom, but emphasize the rights persons have to serve ideals and purposes preserved in specialized circles like that of science and the law in a society. The health of a dynamic society depends on the freedom that persons have to act independently on convictions that further the work of such circles of skilled persons. In fact, Polanyi’s understanding of a “totalitarian” society is bound up with his recognition of the importance of public liberty. A totalitarian society contends that it “completely represents all the collective interests of the community” and, even though it may allow private freedoms, it rejects the “claims of individuals to act independently for the benefit of society.”²⁶

Mitchell does make these more subtle points (that flesh out Polanyi’s notions of liberty) somewhat clearer in a later section of his second chapter that is devoted to showing how Polanyi’s ideas about polycentrism yield a certain vision of science:

The kind of society Polanyi describes is not one in which individuals are at liberty to do anything they please so long as they do not infringe upon any other individual’s freedom to do the

same. This is an inadequate foundation to support the supervisory structure required for the continuation of either science or a free society.²⁷

In science, Polanyi argues that “individual freedom is restrained by an authority that is created by the practitioners themselves but it is ultimately rooted in a common commitment to transcendent ideals”²⁸ In Mitchell’s general portrayal of Polanyi’s account of science, he emphasizes how and why Polanyi resisted the pervasive centralizing ideology of the mid-twentieth century. This ideology “was rooted in a materialist vision of the world, a world conceived completely in terms of cause-and-effect relationships”²⁹ that Polanyi did not accept. Polanyi saw through the movements aimed at “reducing science to applied science,” recognizing that this would be “the end of science as we know it”³⁰ and effectively the end of the cultivation of knowledge. Mitchell stresses Polanyi’s appreciation for tradition and authority in science, and it is the rejection of these that “gave rise to the ideal of explicit, objective knowledge”³¹ which came to be revered in the science and philosophy of science of Polanyi’s day. Polanyi’s account of science and society is one that emphasizes how important are the commitments of participants to transcendent ideals such as truth and justice. Mitchell makes clear that Polanyi portrays the scientist as a person of conscience and as one not so much who applied a “method” as one who can see and solve problems. Polanyi links such skilful discernment with perception. In sum, Mitchell’s seventeen-page discussion of science incisively covers Polanyi’s major themes. He makes much use of some of Polanyi’s essays written from the mid-thirties until the publication of *The Logic of Liberty* in 1951. This is important material, and it is true that Polanyi’s ideas about the organization of science and the delicate relation of the scientific community to the larger political culture did not change much after World War II.

The final section of Mitchell’s important second chapter is titled “Politics”; discussion here turns from Polanyi’s account of science per se to Polanyi’s broader criticism of the development

of modern ideas and the political fallout these ideas have yielded in the twentieth century. Mitchell clearly sets forth Polanyi's account of the moral and political implications of objectivism, showing how the turn to modern philosophical suppositions ultimately leads to what Polanyi calls "moral inversion," which is a "combination of skeptical rationalism and moral perfectionism."³² Moral inversion succors nihilism; according to Polanyi, its impact has been devastating in modern life. Unlike Europe, Britain and America to some degree "escaped the frenzied passion produced by moral inversion"³³ because political life muddled along in practice following established traditions and ignoring the consequences of theoretical views that took root in modernity. Polanyi's philosophy, in Mitchell's words, calls for and provides the philosophical ground for "a recovery of balance between man's moral demands and his critical powers."³⁴ The philosophical grounding for such a recovery required hammering out a new vision of the nature of knowing. In sum, in the final component of his second chapter, Mitchell nicely complements his earlier discussion of Polanyi's ideas about economics and science. He deftly summarizes Polanyi's critical philosophical conclusions about the development of modern ideas and their violent consequences.

Mitchell next turns to Polanyi's epistemology as the heart of his constructive philosophizing. The discussion here is broken into ten sections. Polanyi recognized that belief was the foundation of knowledge and that a proper understanding of liberty also required understanding how foundational belief was. His Gifford Lectures and the book that grew out of these lectures, *Personal Knowledge*, make his case for the priority and importance of belief; this is what Polanyi called "the fiduciary programme,"³⁵ and it is woven seamlessly with the philosophy of commitment that he articulates. Out of his interest in belief and commitment grows a richer understanding of what Polanyi later called the "structure of tacit knowing."³⁶ The sections in Mitchell's chapter are meant to mirror this development in Polanyi's ideas. First there is a discussion of what Polanyi draws from Augustine, the

recognition of the “indispensable role belief plays in all knowing.”³⁷ But according to Mitchell, “while Polanyi embraces an Augustinian approach to epistemology, he is decidedly non-Augustinian in his view of social progress.”³⁸ Next Mitchell turns again to tradition and authority, matters that he has already emphasized in earlier chapters. But in this epistemological discussion, he wants to make clear that tradition for Polanyi is not static; there is “an orthodoxy that enforces a kind of discipline on those subject to the tradition; but the orthodoxy is a dynamic one in that ‘it implicitly grants the right to opposition in the name of truth.’”³⁹ This well-turned phrase that incorporates one of Polanyi’s most eloquent comments shows that Mitchell has an eye for Polanyi’s most concise and clear statements; he puts them to excellent use here and throughout his book to summarize major themes. Mitchell emphasizes how tradition is always linked to a community that embraces and passes forward valued practices and ideals: “. . . knowing requires the existence of a society committed to a particular tradition and engaged in passing it on.”⁴⁰ He carefully lays out Polanyi’s integrative model of tacit knowing, showing its roots in Gestalt ideas.⁴¹ Knowers dwell in subsidiary particulars in order to attend to a more comprehensive focal target; Polanyi regards the comprehensive entity as an achievement that is an integration of tacitly known particulars or subsidiaries. Mitchell sets forth a classification of six kinds of examples of tacit knowing that Polanyi gives in his writing, and he explains the four aspects of tacit knowing that Polanyi discusses in *The Tacit Dimension*. He carefully reviews Polanyi’s claims about indwelling and extending the body and participation in knowing. In sum, the nine-page discussion in the subsection titled “Tacit Knowing” is a good concise summary of the central elements of Polanyi’s theory of knowledge.

In the sections at the end of his third chapter, Mitchell rounds out his account of Polanyi’s epistemologically grounded perspective by briefly discussing some topics and themes that, unfortunately, are sometimes overlooked. He tries briefly to explain Polanyi’s particular brand of philosophical realism, which does

not fit comfortably with most modern discussions of philosophical realism.⁴² Mitchell notes that Polanyi's realism has been an element of his thought much discussed by scholars. His discussion is sensibly organized around four points about which there will likely be general agreement. Mitchell does a particularly good job of conveying Polanyi's sense of

the infinite richness of reality. The richness of the real produces unexpected manifestations. Because we are finite, we will never reach the core of reality, a reality that presents us with infinite possibilities. The process of knowing presents us with continual surprises.⁴³

In his subsection titled "On Embeddedness," Mitchell makes clear Polanyi's conviction that to be human is to be grounded in a particular language used in a particular culture in a particular historical context. Human knowers have no access to Archimedean points of view.⁴⁴ While our finite embedded nature marks our limitedness, it also marks the opportunity for our achievement. In the final two sections of his third chapter, Mitchell shows how, from a Polanyian perspective, the subjective-objective and fact-value dichotomies that so readily spring to mind for most moderns are not tenable. He discusses briefly the importance of intellectual passions and what Polanyi called "universal intent."⁴⁵ Mitchell shows how Polanyi's model re-conceives the nature of knowing and shifts the discussion of the nature of truth and meaning:

By eliminating the distinction between facts and values, Polanyi sought to reestablish the possibilities for humans to embrace with confidence such values as truth, beauty, and justice. These are not merely subjective preferences; they are ideals to which we may personally commit ourselves in the belief that they are truly meaningful, for they bear on intangible reality.⁴⁶

In "Meaning, Morality, and Religion," Mitchell moves from Polanyi's fundamental claims about knowing to a broader discus-

sion of the implications of these claims. Clearly Polanyi is not a materialist, but a figure whose goal “in formulating a new account of knowing was to reintroduce the possibility of making meaningful truth claims, about nonphysical reality.”⁴⁷ Polanyi reopens the door for conversations about moral ideas, aesthetics, and religion. Mitchell does a nice job of summarizing Polanyi’s criticisms of modern reductionism and of sketching out Polanyi’s multi-level conception of reality. He sorts carefully through some of Polanyi’s confusing terminology (dual control, boundary conditions, etc.) and Polanyi’s ideas about the hierarchical structure of comprehensive entities. In one of his subsections, he makes an interesting attempt to sketch out a moral theory, something Polanyi did not do but something Mitchell argues is implicit in Polanyi’s writing. Moral ideas and practices are like other ideas and practices: “we come to accept moral teaching, like any other body of skillful knowing, by entrusting ourselves to a moral tradition or teacher in a process that is often referred to as interiorization.”⁴⁸ Moral ideas are products of a person’s tacit integrations; while they are not arbitrary, they are tied to a tradition and a community. They are intangibles more real than most tangibles. Moral ideas function as largely unspecifiable subsidiaries that inform human judgment and they have indeterminate future manifestations. New values in both science and culture do emerge when human beings struggle to understand reality more deeply and their moral ideas subtly shift.

There is a lengthy discussion in this chapter of Polanyi’s ideas about religion. Mitchell is a fair-minded scholar (an important virtue, according to Polanyi) who acknowledges that this is terrain on which there has been much conflict in Polanyi scholarship. His book is an introduction and he intends primarily to reference rather than explore some of the debated questions. Perhaps because Polanyi’s philosophical ideas seem early to have attracted the attention of Christian theologians (a group more open to criticism of the modern philosophical tradition), writing about Polanyi’s religious ideas and his religious affiliations (or lack thereof) became a virtual cottage industry. Mitchell is aware

of much of this discussion, which I treat below in discussions of other books. It is certainly the case, as Mitchell stresses, that Polanyi's ideas about religion as well as other topics were importantly shaped by his friend J. H. Oldham and Oldham's circle of friends, who had great interest in Christianity and Christianity's role in the world emerging after World War II. Polanyi's post-critical ideas were in part shaped through his participation for about twenty years in Oldham's discussion groups. As Richard Gelwick has pointed out, Polanyi credited his participation in Oldham's groups as second only to his experience as a scientist in shaping his thought.⁴⁹ It is also certainly true, as Mitchell emphasizes, that Polanyi's post-critical philosophical perspective is open to, and interested in, religious realities and religious truth in a way that most modern philosophy is not. One only has to look at the end of *Personal Knowledge*, *The Tacit Dimension*, some late Polanyi essays, or the late book *Meaning*, written with Harry Prosch, to see that Polanyi seems to have anticipated a religious renaissance. It is often, however, not clear precisely what Polanyi is saying about religion in many texts (and opinions of interpreting scholars have varied), and it is not clear that there is consistency among the different texts; it seems that Polanyi often preferred to hint at rather than thoroughly expound his ideas about religion in the way he did on some other topics.⁵⁰ While Mitchell's general comments on Polanyi's ideas and religion are balanced, in my view he relies too much on what the Christian theologian Thomas Torrance had to say about Polanyi's religious commitments and religious ideas. Some of the things Torrance has said about Polanyi and his religious commitments and ideas seem largely to be self-serving. Some of Torrance's comments about Harry Prosch's collaboration with the aging and increasingly senile Polanyi on his last book *Meaning*, as well as Torrance's claims about his appointment as Polanyi's literary executor, do not fit with the historical record. While these may be small matters in an introduction to Polanyi's thought, those who read Mitchell's account should be keyed to the fact that there is more to the story about Polanyi and religion than Mitchell lays out here, although

he does do a credible job of referencing some important parts of the scholarly discussion.

The section in Mitchell's chapter titled "Religion in *Personal Knowledge*" works through Polanyi's cryptic comments about religion in his *magnum opus*. This is something that other scholars have also tried to sort out.⁵¹ Mitchell does quote and comment helpfully upon some of the striking Polanyi lines about religion that always attract the attention of readers new to *Personal Knowledge*. He nicely summarizes Polanyi's discussion of differences in verification and validation and Polanyi's ideas about levels of participation vis-à-vis types of real known objects. For my taste, Mitchell's occasional attempts in his discussion to explain Polanyi's views by analogs with C. S. Lewis's views are of limited value. Polanyi was not a conservative Christian, and readers should be very clear about this. Mitchell's short section titled "Faith and Reason" picks up themes noted earlier in his discussion of Polanyi and Augustine: "Polanyi seeks to restore faith to its proper place by showing how it is central to the knowing process."⁵² The final discussion in the "Science and Religion" subsection returns to implications of Polanyi's stratified ontology. Mitchell does a nice job of showing how Polanyi weaves together his antimaterialistic metaphysic, his cosmology, and his *Lebensphilosophie*:

Life is an achievement. Human life—characterized by consciousness, curiosity, creativity and moral responsibility—represents the apex of this achievement. Bound up within the meaning of human existence is our duty, as individual centers of thought and responsibility, to employ our faculties to live lives worthy of our cosmic calling.⁵³

Mitchell's final chapter, "Engaging Polanyi in the Twentieth Century and Beyond," moves from the overview of Polanyi's thought to a brief comparison of Polanyi's views and those of three contemporaries: Michael Oakshott, Eric Voegelin, and Alasdair MacIntyre. These three have some affinities with Polanyi

or make some use of Polanyi, and all three are, like Polanyi, deeply interested in the politics of the twentieth century and the cultural roots of politics. Certainly, for the reader seeking an introduction to Polanyi who also knows something about any one or all of these figures, this discussion might be a helpful bridge. Readers unfamiliar with any of these thinkers can perhaps skip this section, although there are in Mitchell's discussions some generally interesting wrinkles. Mitchell, for example, comments on Polanyi's correspondence with the recently deceased William F. Buckley Jr., and Polanyi's hesitancy to see much that paralleled his ideas in American conservatism. Mitchell does a particularly good job in his discussion of MacIntyre and Polanyi in showing that Polanyi's ideas are closer to those of MacIntyre than MacIntyre thinks. At the end of this chapter, Mitchell concludes with a brief final discussion outlining how Polanyi's ideas in the new century can "help move us beyond both Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern skepticism."⁵⁴ This discussion is one of the most interesting sections of this introduction to Polanyi because here Mitchell moves somewhat beyond Polanyi, but in a way that is consistent with Polanyi's thought. Mitchell suggests, for example, that "philosophical materialism provides the psychological and spiritual license" for the consumerism of the contemporary American society and that "in such a milieu, fidelity to one's home or community is eroded by the primary value of acquisition."⁵⁵ He discusses the ways in which contemporary society often is self-indulgent and relativistic in orientation and how far this falls from Polanyi's vision for humanity in which "liberty must ultimately be in the service, not of trade, but of transcendent ideals."⁵⁶ At least to this reader, such claims seem to be on the Polanyian mark.⁵⁷ I look forward to Mitchell's future scholarly efforts to dwell in Polanyi's philosophical framework in order to extend the contours of post-critical thought. In sum, *Michael Polanyi* is a very solid introduction to Polanyi, one that probes in a sophisticated manner the breadth and depth of Polanyi's thought.