
REVIEWS

J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006. Pp. 347+xviii. \$49.95 hb. ISBN0-8028-32466.

Consider this quotation: “The development of a postfoundationalist notion of rationality helped me move beyond any position that would want to regard either science or theology as a superior form of rational thinking” (xiv). Or this: “On this postfoundationalist view embodied persons, and not abstract beliefs, should be seen as the locus of rationality. We, as rational agents, are thus always socially and contextually embedded. Moreover, it is as embodied rational agents that we perform rationally by making informed and responsible judgments in very specific personal, communal, but also disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts” (10). These thoughtful presuppositions Wentzel Van Huyssteen brings to these Gifford Lectures of 2004 would be highly sympathetic to any follower of Michael Polanyi’s philosophical perspective. Van Huyssteen makes clear his indebtedness to Polanyi, among others, for his role in articulating a postfoundationalist epistemology. “On an epistemological level this modernist mode of inquiry was definitively dealt with first by Michael Polanyi, then by Thomas Kuhn, and post-Kuhn by various strands of postmodern science. What this move has made increasingly clear is that all our inquiry, whether scientific or theological, is highly contextual and already presupposes a particular theoretical, doctrinal, or personal stance and commitment” (5-6).

Given this beginning point congenial to Polanyians, where does Van Huyssteen take his inquiry? What is his goal, and does he accomplish his aim successfully? The author’s aim is to carry out an interdisciplinary inquiry into the nature of human uniqueness, an inquiry in which evolutionary epistemology,

paleoanthropology, and the Christian notion of humans as the bearers of the *imago dei* are brought into productive interchange. The book features glorious illustrations of Paleolithic cave paintings from such sites as Lascaux, Gargas, and Cougnac. Van Huyssteen includes ideas from an impressively wide range of thinkers. This is an erudite work that is carried out with a high degree of self conscious construction.

Unfortunately, some of the book’s strengths just alluded to turn out also to be weaknesses. Too often the various writers’ views are strung together without being integrated in any consistent way into Van Huyssteen’s own explicit perspective. This is understandable when one considers that party to the conversation are people as diverse as Karl Barth, Pascal Boyer, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jurgen Moltmann, Karl Popper, Alasdair MacIntyre, Abraham Heschel, Charles Darwin, Gerhard van Rad, Thomas Huxley, Augustine, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But something other than wide diversity of views is at work here. Van Huyssteen borrows from Calvin Schrag the metaphor of transversality, by which he means “a performative praxis where our multiple beliefs and practices, our habits of thought and attitudes, our prejudices and assessments, converge” (21). I’d be hard pressed to explain how the language of “transversal” represents an improvement over “comparative.” However, Schrag helpfully infuses his notion of transversality with an embodied, tacit dimension so that “existential dwellings rather than dead frames of reference” (22) are brought into juxtaposition. Van Huyssteen holds out the hope for cross-disciplinary integration as a product of transversal dialogue, but he also states, “This postfoundationalist approach to interdisciplinarity also revealed interdisciplinary reflection as nonhierarchical because no one disciplinary voice, and no one set of judgments, practices, or principles, will be able to claim absolute priority over, or be foundational for, any other” (41). In truly open interdisciplinary dialogue,

should one not be open to discovery of priorities if not foundations? In practice, Van Huyssteen's theological commitments never really seem open to question, and the various disciplines and voices brought into conversation never quite gel into any more inclusive vision.

The extreme self consciousness Van Huyssteen brings to the work means that he tends to tell you what he is going to do several times, tells you that he is doing it, and then tells you what he has done a number of times. In short, the writing is highly repetitive. No doubt the redundancy is partially a reflection of the need of a speaker to remind his audience, some of whom will have attended only one lecture, what he is up to. But a book is a different creature than a series of lectures, and this book would benefit from some serious editing.

Apart from such stylistic complaints, what does the book accomplish substantively? I am grateful for having been introduced to a number of thinkers I had not encountered before. I found the thesis developed by David Lewis-Williams that some of the cave drawings are best explained in terms of shamanistic ritual and out of body experiences intriguing if not fully convincing.

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Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2005. Pp. 277. ISBN 0-316-17232-4. \$25.95.

In *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Tipping Point* and a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, argues that our tacit powers of knowing (a) work fast, (b) can be more reliable than explicit analysis, but (c) can seriously mislead us. Gladwell never refers to Polanyi, nor does he explicitly write of "tacit knowledge." This review, however, is an explicitly Polanyian reading of *Blink*.

He begins with reflections on "the statue that didn't look right." In September of 1983, the people who ran the J. Paul Getty Museum in California were trying to decide whether or not to buy an almost perfectly preserved statue of a young nude male. It was presented to them as an example of the type of statue known as a *kouros*, dating from about the sixth century BCE. Scientific analyses of the statue satisfied the museum officials that the statue was genuine, but they hesitated because many of the art historians and collectors, upon seeing the statue, had immediate negative reactions. They could not specify their reasons, other than to say that somehow, it just "didn't look right." It turned out that these "gut reactions" were right on the money. "In the first two seconds of looking – in a single glance – they were able to understand more about the essence of the statue than the team at the Getty was able to understand after fourteen months" (8).

In Polanyian terms, this is an example of "connoisseurship," which is a kind of skill, acquired only by long experience, usually under the guidance of one who has already mastered the skill.

Connoisseurship, like skill, can be communicated only by example, not by precept. To become an expert wine-taster, to acquire a knowledge of innumerable different blends of tea or be trained as a medical diagnostician, you must go through a long course of experience under the guidance of a master (PK 54).

The reason the art historians were unable to say why the *kouros* didn't look right was, in Polanyi's language, that they had only subsidiary awareness of the particular details which came together to produce their strongly negative reactions. They knew more than they could say.

Blink is full of examples of tacit knowing, with an emphasis upon the speed with which it takes place. Polanyi drew upon the psychological research of his

day, particularly in Gestalt psychology. Gladwell draws upon more recent findings in cognitive psychology. He refers to studies of “fast and frugal” knowing, and of the “adaptive unconscious” (256). And, like Polanyi, Gladwell emphasizes the vital importance of relying upon these powers of knowing, even though we cannot specify just how they lead us to our snap judgments and decisions. And, also like Polanyi, Gladwell recognizes that these tacit powers of knowing sometimes lead us astray. We have to trust knowledge that might be mistaken.

Gladwell discusses mistaken fast and frugal knowing in his third chapter, entitled “The Warren Harding Error: Why We Fall For Tall, Dark, and Handsome Men.” His topic in this chapter is unconscious bias. Unconscious biases work in favor of men, like Harding, who looked presidential in spite of their lack of talent for the job. They work against African Americans, who suffer from unconscious discrimination even on the part of people who are deeply committed to equality and racial justice. “Taking rapid cognition seriously – acknowledging the incredible power, for good and ill, that first impressions play in our lives – requires that we take active steps to manage and control those impressions” (97-98).

In the next three chapters, Gladwell gives a number of examples of how people in different areas of life have taken active steps, not just to “manage and control” fast and frugal knowing, but to facilitate it. A successful battlefield commander tries to be “in command” by establishing battlefield strategy but “out of control” of the soldiers being supervised – they need to improvise on the scene without waiting for orders from above (118). An improvisational comedy group creates a script and a plot on stage by accepting everything each actor does. A manager of an emergency room improves diagnoses of heart attacks by cutting down on the amount of information ER doctors have to take into account. Women break into symphony orchestras in significant numbers only after auditions begin to take place behind screens. The screens prevent those who are selecting candidates from “listening with their eyes.”

Gladwell argues that explicit knowledge is valuable. He relies heavily upon explicitly stated theories and hypotheses in cognitive psychology. These become most valuable, however, when they are allowed to become the background for insights that come in the blink of an eye. Moreover, when the results of these insights can be stated, they can, in turn, become part of the theoretical background for new insights. Without ever referring to Polanyi, Gladwell both confirms basic principles of Polanyi’s theory of knowing, and points to ways in which that theory can be developed in the light of recent findings in cognitive psychology.

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