

Jerry Gill on Polanyi, Modern and Postmodern Thought: A Review Essay

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ABSTRACT: Key Words: Jerry Gill, Michael Polanyi, modern and postmodern philosophy
*This review essay discusses elements of the interpretation of Polanyi and of Polanyi's place in modern and postmodern philosophy in Jerry Gill's **The Tacit Mode: Michael Polanyi's Postmodern Philosophy**. Criticisms focus on Gill's account of modern philosophy, his construal of the relation of tacit and explicit knowing, his claims about the body and the person and his idealist-inclined reading of Polanyi.*

Jerry H. Gill, *The Tacit Mode: Michael Polanyi's Postmodern Philosophy* (SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought, David Ray Griffin, editor). Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. 192 pages. \$17.95 paper. ISBN: 0791444309.

Introductory Overview

After giving a brief introductory overview and ending with a summary conclusion, Jerry Gill proceeds with the following four-part agenda: 1. He gives an exposition of the major philosophical problems that have plagued modernity. 2. He then presents his interpretation of Polanyi's epistemology of tacit knowing with the explicit aim of showing how it solves these major problems. 3. Next, he discusses some major themes in postmodernism and presents a Polyanian brief regarding these matters. 4. Finally, he shows how Polanyi's thought can be used to solve various modern philosophical problems in the areas of language, education, art, and religion. I will confine my criticism to issues that are raised in the first two parts. And although there is much to criticize in the last two sections and in the conclusion, I will simply say a word or two about the issues discussed in these sections in case a reader should want to consult Gill's remarks on them.

Modern Problems

If you like the historical gloss, you may well love the first chapter of Gill's book, which he entitles: "The Basis of Modern Thought." As I see it, there is nothing wrong per se with using this technique, so long as it is helpful. What makes the historical gloss helpful is that it gives us a concise and accurate picture of a period, movement, ideology, or what have you. For example, it is often helpful to be able to say such things as, "This is modern philosophy in a nutshell." Unfortunately, the gloss often confuses more than it clarifies. I am afraid that this is the case in Gill's gloss of modern philosophy.

After settling on when modern philosophy began, namely with Descartes, and after claiming that "modern philosophy" is what Polanyi means by "critical philosophy," Gill opens his own (and Polanyi's?) "critique" of it. I suspect that, along with the irony of Gill's project of criticizing modern critical philosophy, there is some question as to what Polanyi himself meant by "critical" and hence some question as to what he might have had in mind by this notion of "post-critical." This question is made more urgent by the usual

identification of the beginning of the era of critical philosophy with Kant's various "Critiques." In addition, given the title of Gill's book, we might wonder about whether the term "post-critical" can be assimilated, if appropriately qualified, to the term "postmodern." And there are other historical questions, for example, was Plato's philosophical critique of Athenian sensibility a form of critical philosophy? That is, was pre-modern philosophy also critical philosophy? In what sense?

According to Gill, modern philosophy is founded on, and founders on, a search for a foundation for knowledge. Descartes started the search and landed on the indubitability of the existence of consciousness (the mind) in contrast to the dubitability of matter (the world). Hard to believe perhaps, but Descartes thought that the mind was a more solid epistemological/ontological foundation than matter. But whether we agree with him or not, he set the agenda for modern philosophy—call this the struggle between idealism and materialism. The struggle, however, turns out, in Gill's version of it, to be a family squabble. While the two sides in this debate can't decide which foundation is the more secure, there seems to be no doubt that the house of knowledge needs a solid one. Hume, as much as Descartes, thought so and became a skeptic precisely because he discovered that the foundations of knowledge were, if not crumbling, at least definitely not solid enough. Kant, on the other hand, tried to rebuild the house of knowledge and reality by providing them with a "new" foundation. But how new was Kant's suggestion? To quote from Gill: "Unlike Descartes, Kant did not maintain that this bedrock is provided by abstract reason alone, and unlike Hume he did not expect to find it amidst the data of sensory experience. Rather, Kant placed the pivotal ground of knowing in the structure of the mind itself, in the way that it serves as the condition of the possibility of knowledge *per se*." (27)

As Gill sees it, Kant was on to something. He says: "There is something extremely right-headed about this move on Kant's part..." (27) So does Gill think that the critical philosopher par excellence was really an incipient "post-critical" philosopher? Well not quite. Where Kant failed, he goes on to say, is in not recognizing the crucial place the body plays in knowing; this is precisely where Polanyi excelled. So, we might ask: "Is the problem with modern philosophy that it looks for a foundation, or that it looks in the wrong place? There is reason to think that Gill thinks both, which makes his analysis of modern philosophy less than helpful. So is Kant's right-headed move to be found in the fact that he was nosing around in the right direction for the right ground but just overlooked the role of his nose, that is, of his body in this process? I thought that what Gill wanted to say is that what is wrong-headed in modern philosophy (which I think must include Kant) is its insistence on searching for a ground, not in its failure to find the right one. So is Polanyi post-modern insofar as he abandons the search for a ground, or insofar as he found a ground that modern philosophy had overlooked? There seem to be, dare I say it, grounds for thinking that Gill thinks the latter. He says: "Polanyi introduces an understanding of knowing as grounded in the body, the society of knowing agents, and the affirmation of our cognitive powers of judgment." (30) Taking *this ground* "...enables us to act with both confidence and humility in the quest for knowledge." (30, italics added)

So where does this leave us? It seemed at first that Gill wanted to say that modern philosophy could be characterized (in a nutshell) as an illegitimate search for a secure foundation for knowledge. As the gloss unfolds, however, it seems that Gill would have us see that modern philosophy's mistake (in a nutshell) was not in seeking a foundation (ground) for knowledge but in seeking a certain sort of foundation (ground), namely, a certain one. Gill implies that Polanyi's solution to all of the philosophical problems attendant to this search was not in abandoning the search but in finding and hence in founding the right sort of ground for knowledge. And what is this? Well, I would have thought he would have said that persons constitute this ground—that is, the foundation of knowledge is in persons, and this is what makes all knowledge personal

knowledge. Gill, however, thinks that the ground that Polanyi adds to Kant's search for a ground is the body. (And amazingly to me, Gill thinks Polanyi "draws quite heavily" from Merleau-Ponty (49) to make this point, which, as I see it, is just historically inaccurate and misleading.)

It turns out that for Gill this new ground—the body—is an *axis* not a *foundation*. But is this helpful? What images come to mind in this replacement? I am inclined to think of the earth spinning on its axis in space with nothing holding it up. Or is gravity holding it up? Or more generally is our concept of an axis here itself grounded in something like the laws of physics? Do we want to say, like one of Gill's mentors, namely Wittgenstein, that because knowledge has an axis but not a foundation that it is groundless? Or does it have a bedrock foundation/ground? Or is the claim simply that the bedrock foundation has no further ground/foundation? Despite his talk of groundlessness, even Wittgenstein's spade is turned when it digs deep enough. Do we want to say that knowledge is grounded in the body and yet the body is not itself grounded in the world or at least the earth? Is this axis-talk just another way of flirting with idealism? And Kant, of course, did more than just flirt with idealism; he went all the way, Platonically speaking, of course.

So again where does this leave us? One thing is clear to me, Gill's gloss of these matters, which includes his introduction of the idea of an axis, or as we might say, the body-as-axis, doesn't get us very far toward Gill's avowed goal of telling us what the "basis" of modern thought is.

Tacit Solutions

I suspect that the next section of the book will be more important for many TAD readers than the first, since it is designed to provide a concise introduction to Polanyi's thought. Indeed, this book, and especially this section promises to be of great help, as one of the book's back cover reviewers has put it, "...to the uninitiated in navigating Polanyi's writing." I am not sure that this is true. But I think that what this same writer subsequently claims is true: "Gill is not afraid to develop his own framework for interpreting Polanyi..." But just as surely, I think that what the reviewer follows with is again not true: "...but he [Gill] is always faithful to the content and import of Polanyi's writings."

Of course, if the last claim is false, then the first one must also be false. And it may be the case that it is because the middle claim is true that the other two are not. But lest this review run on too long (is it already too late for this?), allow me to try to substantiate my claim that the reviewer's last claim above is false.

Is Gill always faithful to the content and import of Polanyi's writing? Let me make two points, one general, one very specific.

First, Gill represents the structure of tacit knowing as a continuum. He even presents us with a quite elaborate drawing of the structure of tacit knowing (fig.2.1). I take this to be misleading insofar as it suggests that the more one moves toward the explicit, the more one moves away from the tacit and vice versa. As I see it, such a reading fails to be dialectical enough to be faithful to Polanyi's conception of the relation between the tacit and the explicit. I would say that the more explicit one's knowledge, the greater its tacit component, though not vice versa. Indeed, it is possible to have one's knowledge almost completely tacit, but never possible for one's knowledge to be wholly explicit. And yet it is our explicit knowledge, knowledge that we can say, that makes human knowledge distinctively human, that is, different than animal knowledge. The

problem with modernity (in a nutshell) as I see it, is not that it seeks explicit knowledge, but rather that it does not acknowledge that all explicit knowledge is rooted in the tacit. I think it is a major concern of Polanyi to show this, especially in his chapter on articulation in *PK*. The ground of human (personal) knowledge, as I would put it, is not the body, but the concrete speech-act. And of course, we must not lose sight of the fact that the tendrils of speech extend into the body, but not only into the body. The roots of speech also extend into the world tying us to others and to the earth. Such are the tacit resources of speaking. We can say what we say, only because we know more than we can say. But precisely because of these tacit resources, we are not spinning on the free-floating axis of our body; rather, we are enmeshed in a fabric of deep, tacit, connections to others and to the world.

Or to put this in a slightly different way, personal knowledge is not simply knowledge in “*the tacit mode*.” Rather Polanyi’s insight is that all explicit knowledge includes a dialectically excluded tacit component. In my judgment, this conception of personal knowledge as a dialectic of the tacit and the explicit is more faithful to Polanyi’s project than thinking of it exclusively as knowledge in the tacit mode.

But let me provide a very specific instance in which I think that Gill is not faithful to Polanyi’s writings. On the last pages of this section, Gill takes on the well worn idea that knowledge is true, justified belief. Quite amazingly to me, he questions the truth component in this definition. If a person believes *x* and has justification for this belief, that is, has evidence for it, then why say it also has to be true? His reasons for this turn on his confusion of a theory of truth and a theory of verification. As well, he seems to be assuming a “critical,” that is, a Kantian, view of human knowing as limited, that is, as falling short of the God’s eye. He says: “To require that an assertion actually be the case in order to be counted as knowledge entails that someone can be in a position to judge whether or not this is so. But, of course, this can never happen since human knowers cannot transcend their cognitive context to see reality from the ‘God’s eye’ perspective” (68). This leads him to a position that stands in direct contradiction to Polanyi. He says: “...the idea that something could be true totally independently of our knowledge that this is so is essentially circular...what could it mean for truth to be independent of our knowledge of it? (69). Does Gill think that if we do not have enough evidence to determine whether a particular claim is true or false that it is neither? But isn’t it true that some state of “affairs” may not obtain (for example, that Clinton had sex with Paula Jones) even if we believe it and even if we have good evidence for believing it? But justified belief is not enough to count as knowing it; it must be true. Does Gill think that believing with justification that *x* is true makes *x* true? He seems to. But surely this would make no sense if what is claimed to be true is a reality that exists independently of our knowing it. Does Gill think that there is no reality that exists independently of our knowing it? He seems to. But if so, this is in direct contradiction to Polanyi. So to make my point that Gill is not faithful to the content and import of Polanyi’s writing on this point, let me simply quote Polanyi: “By trying to say something that is true about a reality believed to be existing independently of our knowing it, all assertions of fact carry *universal intent*. *Our claim to speak of reality serves thus as the external anchoring of our commitment in making a factual statement*” (PK 311). Perhaps Gill’s rotating axis needs just such an anchor (ground) in reality.

Deconstructing Deconstruction?

Even though this book is supposed to be about Polanyi’s postmodern philosophy, it does not have much to say about it. The section on postmodernism turns out to be more about the usual postmodernists, Derrida et. al., than about Polanyi. But there is one last section that is called “A Polyanian Critique.” It is all

of 5½ pages. In this, Gill spends a good deal of time finding common ground between Polanyi and Postmodernism: both are, well, post-modern. The difference is that Polanyi is not content with deconstruction alone: he also wants to be reconstructive, as the postmodernists generally do not want to be. Unfortunately, not much light is shed on the issues in this section.

Applications

In this section, which seems to be an afterthought, Gill takes on a brief discussion of language. The first part of this discussion is basically a reprise of Polanyi's "Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading." Gill then goes on to discuss some hackneyed parallels with Wittgenstein. He moves then to a brief discussion of language acquisition, making the doubtful claim that Polanyi's ideas square with Chomsky's. Finally, he ends with some remarks on why human beings are not "thinking machines."

Next Gill turns to education. Some remarks are made about the *Meno* and some comparisons are made between Polanyi and Whitehead, and between Polanyi and Skinner, Carl Rogers, and finally, Dewey.

In the final chapter, Gill discusses art and religion. TAD readers might find this section helpful since it focuses on the issues that Polanyi discusses in *Meaning*. Gill ends up thinking that Prosch is wrong to think that Polanyi radically separated scientific knowledge from knowing in the arts and in religion.

Conclusion

The book tries to end with a summary. But, as if not quite satisfied with what has gone before, Gill won't stop. He closes with some further remarks. He turns to the relevance of Polanyi's thought for thinking about how human chess-players are different from "Deep Blue," the chess-playing computer.

Postscript

But let me end this review. I am puzzled: is it Gill's claim that Polanyi's denial that human thinking is mechanistic is a mark of his post-modernism? If so, would we say that the romantic reaction to mechanism is also post-modern? As I see it, subjectivism is as much a part of the modern as is objectivism. If anything, post-modernists are just modern subjectivists. Surely, Polanyi offers an alternative to these two alternatives. Whether or not we call his alternative modern or post-modern matters less than what the alternative amounts to. Fleshing this out is certainly a worthy project, something that I would be happy to see Jerry Gill take on.

WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/>. In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) the history of Polanyi Society publications, including a listing of issues by date and volume with a table of contents for recent issues of *Tradition and Discovery*; (2) a comprehensive listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) information on locating early publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Polanyi's thought; (5) the "Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi" which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library; (6) photographs of Michael Polanyi.

Reply to Ron Hall's Review

Jerry H. Gill

ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, modern and postmodern philosophy

*This brief comment is a point-by-point response to some elements of Ron Hall's review of my recent book, **The Tacit Mode: Michael Polanyi's Postmodern Philosophy.***

I shall pass over the trivializing and anti-convivial tone of Ron Hall's review and speak directly to several of the substantive issues he raises.

First, with regard to the distinction between "ground" or "foundation" and "axis", I think my presentation of the role of the body in Polanyi's thought (pp.45-50) makes it quite clear that we are talking about persons as embodied agents. About Merleau-Ponty's influence, see *Knowing and Being*, pp.148-155 and pp.221-222. Further, my introduction of the "axis" image as a helpful way to understand Polanyi's insights concerning the place of tacit knowing in human cognition carefully avoids Hall's worries about "objectivism" and "subjectivism" (see p.57).

Second, with respect to the relationship between tacit and explicit knowing, my diagram on p.39, which Polanyi himself saw and commended, is, like all such devices, incomplete. Nevertheless, my discussion of this diagram and its dynamic (pp.54-56), as well as the following sentence, make it quite clear that Hall has misread me: "This account would suggest a symbiotic, bipolar relationship in which cognitivity is understood as a field or dimension within which neither pole can be said to exist or function apart from the other" (p.61).

Third, about knowledge as "justified true belief", Hall is correct that my critique of the third criterion in the standard definition of "knowledge," namely that one's belief must be "true," seems out of harmony with certain emphases in Polanyi's writings. However, I developed this critique in the context of explaining Polanyi's notion of the cognitive enterprise as that of a "society of explorers." My point is that, as nice as it is to speak as if truth can be known in addition to and independently of human social interaction and justification processes, in the end, truth can only be defined as what humans agree that it is as members of the society of explorers seeking universal intent.

Lastly, concerning Polanyi's relation to postmodernism, I am amazed that Hall has failed to appreciate my frequent efforts throughout the book to distinguish Polanyi, as a reconstructive postmodernist, from the more well-known deconstructivist postmodernists. The introductory chapter (pp.5-9), along with the final section of Chapter Four (pp.83-88), clearly distinguish Polanyi's thought from that of Derrida and Foucault, especially by means of the notion of universal intent. Moreover, the opening pages of my concluding chapter (pp.177-179) spell this distinction out quite pointedly.

One final note: it is a pity that Hall makes no mention of Chapter Eight in which the interpretations of Polanyi's thought offered by well over a dozen other thinkers are presented and discussed in some detail. I can only hope that the readers of Hall's review will read my book as well and thus be able to judge for themselves concerning its reliability and usefulness.