



BOOK REVIEW

Tyson, Paul G. *De-Fragmenting Modernity: Reintegrating Knowledge with Wisdom, Belief with Truth, and Reality with Being*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017. Pp. 119. ISBN 978-1-5326-1466-8. \$35.

The title, subtitle and a blurb on the back lured this Polanyian to take a closer look at this concise, clearly written six-chapter book by Paul Tyson, the director of an interdisciplinary center focusing on science, religion, and society at an Australian university. Tyson here sharply criticizes the patterns of thought predominant in modernity and proposes a recovery of an ontological perspective. Some themes here are akin to those also found in Polanyi's writing in the middle decades of the last century, but others are strikingly at odds with Polanyi's philosophical perspective.

The brief opening meditation considers the "technological grid" (2) through which modernity's problems and solutions are conceived; this view often mis-identifies fundamental matters. Tyson's discussion is somewhat reminiscent of Polanyi's account of the problematic dispositions of the modern mind. He straightforwardly claims that ideas are important in modernity: we need "to change our way of life at the level of its primary assumptions, rather than

just trying harder to solve existing problems" (8). Like Polanyi, Tyson zeros in on the "modern crisis." Polanyi focused on the ways in which Enlightenment ideas evolved in modernity, fusing objectivism, scientism, violence, nihilism, and totalitarianism. Tyson focuses on the ways in which ontology was undermined in the late medieval period, preparing the way for today's fragmented late modernity in which "being" now "has very little meaning to us *because* of how we understand knowing and believing" (7). His book proposes "being, knowing and believing always have their meanings in relation to each other" (7) but to recover this sense of things requires a recovery of ontological thinking.

The dense second chapter turns to the history of ideas, arguing that "the very strange and even impossible ideas about what knowledge and belief are" (10) are the fallout from the way "being" became culturally lost to those living in modernity. Tyson aims to untangle the "terminological knot in Western ontology" (11) and thereby allow a recovery of presently disdained classical and medieval traditions of ontological thought. Discussion leads the reader from ancient Greek wonder about "being" through Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, and several post-classical thinkers to Scotus, who effectively dismantles the Thomistic way of linking being and

intelligibility. Scotus develops the notion of God's "infinite being" and "flattens out being in such a way that removes different ontological degrees of reality" with his account of the "univocity of being" (28-29). In this account, "'being' has only one meaning: one either has being or one does not," and "there are no degrees of being" (28-29). All this is compounded by Ockham's nominalism. Since the time of the scientific revolution, "the very idea of 'being' has made very little sense to the modern world" (30) as naturalistic and mechanistic materialism with "no conception of any intellectual and non-material foundation of being" (32) became increasingly dominant. In modernity, the "idea categories appropriate to our actual existence have been lost" (33). The "tripartite understanding of ontological hierarchy" (25), being by participation, being proper, and being by analogy—all of which were obliterated by Scotus—must be recovered.

Tyson next begins to set forth a constructive case to counter "modernity's ontological poverty" (38) but he also, with great vigor, further attacks ideas and practices that he contends undergird modernity. After briefly reviewing the majesty of Aquinas's account, Tyson notes in comparison the modern life-world which "presupposes an empty ontology where knowing is a passive recording of mere facts, and where believing is a function of the constructed worlds of values and meaning that populate the private sphere of negative freedom for each individual" (43). Tyson here (and in other

sections) provides thoughtful but very general claims about the problems of modernity. He seems always intent upon reflecting his mettle as a radical Christian critic and is particularly harsh in judgments about the moral and sociopolitical framework of modernity. His constructive philosophical case emphasizes that being, knowing and believing were—and must again be—understood in terms of action, as they were in earlier Christian Platonist and Thomistic thought. He has an interesting discussion of an action-centered reframing of each of these elements. The final turn in the third chapter claims that human beings have "three existentially grounding realities that we know are true," and these concern "the meaning of language, the reality of love, and the uncontainable in-breaking of the noumenal" (53). These grounding existential realities are radically at odds with the increasingly fragile life-world we inhabit in modernity; these realities reveal to us the falsehoods of modernity. Tyson characterizes the corrupt, misguided order of modernity in an abbreviated and staggeringly broad moral, political, and economic snapshot of global change since the depression of the thirties. This shows "how the life-world we now inhabit is radically disconnected from the moral and physical realities of our existence" which, Tyson contends, "were more locally and religiously integral with our mode of life before the astonishing political, employment, financial, and urbanized transformations of Western life effected in the twentieth century" (67).

Tyson's next chapter acknowledges the continuity between his account and ideas developed by John Milbank and others sympathetic with Radical Orthodoxy who contend a defective "tacitly theological substructure" (a departure from a more penetrating Christian medieval framework) underlies "modern Western secularism" and orients the "political, economic, cultural and intellectual topography of our way of life" (69). He argues that his book is not a "nostalgic narrative of decline" but a "nuanced narrative of a particular loss" which is a "forward-looking reconstructive advocacy" (70).

The fourth chapter addresses two objections put forth against the "forgetfulness of being" account. Some argue that cultural development in modernity cannot be qualitatively assessed for development, and is neither better or worse but simply happens. Tyson counters that this view is itself symptomatic of Western modernity's ontological skepticism. Some argue that the decline of ontology and the rise of modern ideas about knowledge, power and belief are genuinely progressive developments. Tyson argues that in some respects modernity has been progressive, but in most respects it has been regressive. He suggests that modernity lacks a genuine qualitative conception of teleology (such as pre-modern Western culture had) and substitutes "efficiency gains in instrumental technologies as measures of 'progress'" (81). He concludes "the driving ideology of progress within modernity is ... a constructed propaganda with no basis in any sort of properly qualitative

conception of genuinely meaningful ends worthy of progressing toward" (82). He is convinced that all forms of liberalism and democratic politics in modernity have "no qualitative or meaningful aim embedded in them that could be aspired toward in order to advance human flourishing" (82). Tyson's combative posture and penchant for sweeping and damning conclusions about the modern social order seems a sharp contrast to Polanyi's critical but nuanced and more appreciative and balanced effort—one oriented around epistemological reform—to reshape the Western culture of the mid-20th century which Polanyi suggests evolved by stages after the scientific revolution.

The penultimate chapter is an effort to "re-think knowledge and belief in such a manner that it could be integral with a meaningful ontology of reality" (93). Tyson argues it is necessary to ground knowing in (prior) meaning (resident in the cosmos), rather than vice-versa, and that such a move will recover truth and make clear that faith and belief are not merely subjective whims. Tyson's constructive proposal is thus a reformed conceptual framework in which knowing, ontology, and believing are deeply linked to each other.

The short final chapter sums up both Tyson's critical and constructive cases. Modernity is "dangerously out of touch with the human and meaningful realities of our actual existence" (112), and "our politics has become sub-human and is no longer responsive to actual human realities" (113). Tyson aims to heal the

modern mind by developing an appreciation for “the metaxological texture of existential actuality” (114). His proposal is for an “ontopia” which is a new place in which “we have recovered a viable vision of being, knowing, and believing” (114).

In sum, *De-Fragmenting Modernity* is a challenging book worth pondering since it argues for a program of ontological recovery rather than epistemological reform. It raises interesting questions and provides a sweeping moral and socio-political critique of modernity that contrasts with Polanyi’s more modest diagnosis of the modern crisis. Although Polanyi’s work is twice mentioned in passing, Tyson does not seem to have seriously engaged science as Polanyi constructively construes it in terms of persons with tacit powers, communities, a hierarchical ontology, and emergence. But it would be interesting to hear his response to a deep reading of Polanyi.

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