
Book Reviews

R. T. Allen, *Thinkers of Our Time: Polanyi*. London: The Claridge Press, 1990. Pp. 87. £9.95. Pb. £5.95. ISBN 1-870626-51-6(7).

This is a brief introduction to the main elements of Michael Polanyi's philosophy. Richard Allen does a good job in summarizing Polanyi's central concerns and ideas. After a brief history of Polanyi's career and some useful suggestions as to how one could best get acquainted with his work, the reader is given a condensed expose of the well-known Polanyian doctrines: the critique of objectivism (Ch.2), the theory of personal knowledge (Ch.3), the fiduciary programme (Ch.4), and the ontology of hierarchical levels (Ch.5). The book ends with a summary of his socio-political ideas (Ch.6: "The Restoration of Freedom and Meaning," 8 pp.) and a few bibliographical remarks on continuations of Polanyi's work (Ch.7, 2 pp.).

Since the book itself has no introduction, the reader is left in the dark regarding the purpose of the series *Thinkers of Our Time* and Allen's own motives and aims in relation to that purpose. One can only guess, for instance, that the sort of readers he is addressing himself to might be theologians, or at least religious believers, but one cannot be sure, and this makes reviewing the book somewhat problematic. What I find rather puzzling in this connection is the text on the cover, where it is suggested that Polanyi was (with F. Hayek) "probably the most important advocate of skeptical conservatism to emerge in Central Europe" and that his theory of personal knowledge remains "indispensable to anyone wishing to formulate the conservative view of society in terms suited to the modern world." These utterances seem to me to be misleading. As far as I know, Polanyi was a true liberal intellectual, dedicated to the pursuit of the ideals of truth, justice and charity and to the upholding of the traditions embodying these ideals. In his summary of Polanyi's social and political ideas, Allen points out rightly that the free society which Polanyi is advocating, is respectful of, and based on, tradition, but certainly dynamic and pro-

gressive as well (p. 75). Surely, this is not the same as "skeptical conservatism."

Polanyi might be characterized as an introduction to already existing and more elaborate introductions, such as Richard Gelwick's *The Way of Discovery* (OUP, 1977), Drusilla Scott's *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi* (1985) and Harry Prosch's *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* (SUNY, 1986). For an introduction the book is very brief (eighty pages) and this might explain some of its weaker points.

Apart from a tendency to emphasize Polanyi's motives and aims, rather than the systematic coherence of his ideas, Allen also tends to depict Polanyi as rather isolated from contemporary Western philosophy. We hear very little of his influence on many well-known philosophers (of science, of religion, of culture, etc.) like Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, Sir Karl Popper, Ian Ramsey, Basil Mitchell, Gerald Holton and many others. Allen does not mention the fundamental shift in present-day philosophy due to the collapse of foundationalism and the role Polanyi played in preparing the way (by his critique of objectivism, his new philosophy of science, and his theory of tacit knowing) for this collapse and for much that nowadays goes under the heading of "post-modernism."

Allen's (few) criticisms of Polanyi seem to me somewhat hazardous, given his obvious lack of space. For instance, Polanyi's anti-reductionist account of ascending levels of reality is found inadequate. We are told that Polanyi merely shows again that the emergence of new levels of existence cannot be accounted for in terms of lower levels. According to Allen, Polanyi tries in vain to account for the emergence of human intelligence and culture by presuming neither [a] "that they were already but invisibly present in the primeval state of the universe," nor [b] "that they are the results of successive divine interventions" (p. 67). But Allen's dilemma is in fact a reduction of Polanyi's trilemma, the third horn of which is [c] that the Noosphere may also be interpreted as a last-

minute improvisation of the anthropogenetic process (cf. *PK* 393). Polanyi would probably reject [a] because it might lead to determinism. His introduction of such notions as “an ordering principle” (*PK* 383f.) or “an orderly innovating principle” (*PK* 387) seems to me to suggest that he kept options [b] and [c] open for further exploration. Whatever he had in mind with this ordering principle (“cosmic field” or “prime cause emergent in time”?) is surely a matter of dispute. In view of his use of the famous example of the “Welcome to Wales” pebbles (*PK* 33), he at least kept the possibility of a religious interpretation open. As I have suggested elsewhere, one might even take the whole of Part Four of *Personal Knowledge* as a sort of extended teleological “argument” from design.

Further problems seem to emerge from Allen’s criticism of Polanyi’s use of the republic of science as a model for a free and democratic society. According to Allen, a society “may need to be formed upon and cohere around a more specific set of beliefs” (p. 75), meaning by this religious beliefs. However, apart from the fact that this suggestion ignores the fact that Polanyi conceived of science, morality, law and religion as cultural systems which partly overlap each other, nothing is said in clarification of the remark (which beliefs, whose religion?).

Polanyi is also criticized because “he omits entirely the hope of seeing God after this life, and thus of achieving perfection through God’s grace and in eternity” (p. 76). Allen doubts whether Polanyi did sufficiently overcome “the errors and dangers of the Enlightenment’s secularization of Christianity” (p. 76). Again, this seems too quick, not only because there is very little argument, but also because Polanyi always depicts the religious way of life as a live and meaningful option (through perhaps more for others than for himself).

A somewhat different issue is Allen’s interpretation of Polanyi’s point about the crucial importance of the

tradition and practice of scientific research and the standards and ideals embedded in them. This idea is illustrated by Allen as follows: “As one can see in many parts of Africa where machines are run until they break down without thought for regular maintenance, it is not enough just to ship machines abroad if there is no tradition of technology. And the same applies to all human activities. Africa is also littered with abandoned constitutions” (p. 42). Surely, there is more here than meets the eye, but whatever it is, I cannot help but feeling that what is presented as an illustration of Polanyi’s point about scientific tradition, is in fact an illustration of something else.

There are a few statements in the book that are less than clear, or at least puzzling. For instance, Allen asserts that “Polanyi takes the correspondence theory of truth...more as an account of how to arrive at truth rather than as a definition of truth” (p. 52), but he does not tell us what he means by this. Also, the statement that Polanyi denied that truth is demonstrable, but did not deny that truth can be known (p. 20) might have been given more explication, especially because it is said elsewhere “that science...can attain, and has attained what is true” (p. 26). As far as I know, Polanyi sees truth as an ideal standard and he rejects the idea that one could be in possession of the truth.

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Richard Allen, *Thinkers of Our Time: Polanyi*. London: The Clarendon Press, 1990. £9.95. Pb £5.95. ISBN 1-870626-51-6(7).

This book is advertised as the first in a new series on “thinkers of our time.” It is brief (25,000 words), and my first comment has to be that these thinkers deserve to have been treated at greater length. Dr. Allen’s writings on Polanyi are widely known, and it is clear that he would, had space permitted, have had more to say on many central issues. But I must review the book as it is, and it is undeniably brief, though not the first brief study. Drusilla Scott’s *Everyman Revived* (The Book Guild, 1985) goes too far in the direction of popular presentation, but it is far from negligible as an introduction to Polanyi’s ideas.

Allen clearly anticipates that his audience will be not “Everyman” but that body of religious thinkers that cleave to Polanyian epistemology in the belief that religious “knowing” is somehow more acceptable in its terms than in those of any other epistemology currently advocated. In my opinion it is a mistake to think that Polanyi’s own view was religious in nature or intention. He developed his epistemology because he believed that it was the only one compatible with modern science as he understood it. It had the additional advantage that it ruled out research in support of any absolute, whether political or epistemological. Rather truth for the genuine scientist could only be provisional, dependent on the commitment to it of the individual and his success in convincing his scientific colleagues. Polanyi recognized that the scientist was a finite organism in a world that was for practical purposes infinite. Polanyi did not believe that we can will anything into existence simply by the strength of our commitment to it (Kuhn got close to this position, but he is rarely cited by theologians!). Moreover, sympathetic as he was to those subscribing to a religious view of the world, Polanyi seems to have counted himself among “those who cannot, through religion, sublimate our dissatisfaction with our own moral shortcomings, and with those of our societies” (*Meaning*, p. 215).

Allen asserts (p. 10) that Polanyi “sought to liberate us from the dangerous errors that have infected modern thought since Galileo and Descartes.” So he did, because Galileo and Descartes are held (by Anglo-Saxon philosophers at least) to be responsible for the dominant empiricist epistemology, which Polanyi believed to be wrong. But Allen goes on to suggest that these “dangerous errors” have resulted in “the totalitarian ideologies, world war, death or slavery for millions, and the contemporary scourge of terrorism!” With due respect to them, philosophers have rarely been as influential as that. None of these evils was unknown in the world prior to Galileo and Descartes.

Allen further asserts (p. 67) that “Polanyi attempts to offer an account that presumes neither that all future developments were already but invisibly present in the primeval state of the universe, nor that they are the results of successive divine interventions.” It seems to him however that “all that Polanyi accomplishes . . . is to show again that the emergence of new levels of existence cannot be accounted for in terms of lower and already existing levels.” Allen might, given more space, have had more to say on what he takes to be the cause of “the emergence of new levels of existence.” To me it seems that if they do not in some sense emerge from “lower and already existing levels” then there is no alternative to “successive divine interventions” which Polanyi was specifically not prepared to countenance.

What Allen has written will serve admirably as an introduction to Polanyi for those who are already committed (like Allen but unlike Polanyi) to the truth of the Christian revelation. Polanyi, as Allen points out (p. 76), “thinks of Christian belief only in terms of this present life.” Polanyi was admittedly more tolerant of Christian belief than many scientists, but his real (though as yet unrecognized) importance is as an epistemologist and philosopher of science. A further study of this aspect of his work had now better wait on the appearance of Professor W. Scott’s authorized biography. Meanwhile, those to whom Allen

specifically addresses himself may refer to his recently published major work, *Transcendence and Immanence in the Philosophy of Michael Polanyi and Christian Theism*.

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Electronic Discussion Group

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. For those with access to the INTERNET, send a message to "owner-polanyi@sbu.edu" to join the list or to request further information. Communications about the electronic discussion group may also be directed to John V. Apczynski, Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778-0012 PHONE: (716)375-2298 FAX: (716)375-2389.

Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. All materials from U.K. contributors should first be sent to John Puddefoot. Manuscripts should be doublespaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered.

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