

Ron Hall's Polanyian Kierkegaardian Critique of the Modern Age

Walter Gulick

Ronald L. Hall, *Word and Spirit: A Kierkegaardian Critique of the Modern Age*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993. Pp. xiii + 218. ISBN0-253-32752-0.

Suppose Michael Polanyi were an existentialist—specifically, a Christian existentialist. What form might his thought have taken in this case? On one interpretation, Ronald Hall's provocative *Word and Spirit* can be read as providing an answer to this question.

To be sure, the subtitle of Hall's work accurately portrays its content: the book delivers a Kierkegaardian critique of the modern age. The thought of Kierkegaard is in the forefront of Hall's discussion, although the final product is much more than simply an exegesis of Kierkegaard. This is because a Polanyian perspective--or more accurately, a Polanyian/Potatian perspective--informs the view Hall argues for. While, as I shall indicate, I do not think Hall's fusion of Kierkegaard and Polanyi/Potat is seamless, his achievement in the book is considerable. His thought is challenging and stimulating. For those interested in extending the existential and Christian dimensions of Polanyi's thought, Hall raises some intriguing possibilities.

One basic Kierkegaardian claim Hall sets forth is that the modern age (including post-modernism as the final demonic stage of the modern age--see pp. 168 and 173) is thoroughly infused with aesthetic notions which celebrate human freedom at the cost of responsibility to others and to the world. Hall spends several key chapters describing Don Giovanni and Faust as prototypes of modern aestheticism. In each case, misuse of language is what creates an aesthetic refuge from the world and provides an ersatz satisfaction. The aesthete transfigures life into art in order to avoid boring repetition, confining commitment, or narrowing of possibility. As the pseudonymous and aesthetically inclined author A of *Either/Or* states, "Pleasure disappoints, possibility never" (vol. I, Swenson trans., p. 40).

By immersing himself in sensual satisfactions, Don Giovanni creates a world where moral and other cultural constraints can be ignored, where words are at most a means to a new sensuous satisfaction. Mozart's opera captures perfectly his lightness of being, a lightness mirrored in the play of Mozart's notes. Don Giovanni's way of living is an example of an at times charming faithlessness, of lack of integrity in speech. His use of language can be seen as an aesthetic precursor of the advertiser, public relations hack, or unscrupulous politician.

Faust's aim is to engage the world, yet not in such a way as to trap him in a banal or confining existence. In order to escape the intellectual isolation of his study, he sought a life of activity, claiming that truly in the beginning was the deed, not the word (p. 134). In ironical contrast to the faithful God of Genesis or John, through whose words creation unfolds, Faust's deeds lead to continual destruction. "Faust's energizing motif is *development*; its guiding principle simply this: the given actuality must be perpetually destroyed, otherwise it will confine the human spirit.

Modernity has come to call this process of perpetual destruction *progress!*" (p. 141). The voices, the words, of *subjects* are lost in a world where progress is king.

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard holds Don Giovanni and Faust up as examples of vacuous and demonic ways of living respectively. Wherever life's meaning is spelled out in terms of a single plane of existence, be it the intellectual system of Hegel, the sensuous immediacy of Don Giovanni, or the unprincipled activism of Faust, its richness is attenuated and responsible living is undermined. Authentic living requires responsible choice that takes into account multiple levels of being. Hall is not interested in tracking Kierkegaard's writings in pursuit of the various ethical and religious ways Kierkegaard shows such choices may take. The primary text he interprets is *Either/Or*; he does not even mention such texts as *Concluding Unscientific Discourse*, *Fear and Trembling*, *The Present Age*, *Repetition*, *Stages on Life's Way*, *Purity of Heart*, or the various tracts on Christianity written in an edifying mode. Hall focuses on contrasting the inadequacy of several forms of aestheticism with one master mode of authenticity centered in faithful speech, speech with an integrity first made possible in the Christian notion of spirit. (Hall correlates spirit with selfhood, but unfortunately this key term is used in a variety of senses.)

Hall acknowledges that the claim made in *Either/Or* that Christianity ushered spirit into the world sounds pretentious and exaggerated. He makes what I think is a less than convincing analysis in defense of the claim. Following Poteat (who followed Thorlief Boman's *Hebrew Thought Compared to Greek*), Hall contrasts the dynamic Hebrew notion of *dabhar*, the creative work, with the static Greek notion of *logos*, the principle of insight and order. *Dabhar* is both word and deed; the term encapsulates the intertwining of thought and action in Hebrew existence. Christianity appropriated *dabhar* as expressive of spirit and linked it to speech-acts, thus fully fleshing out a spiritual mode of engaging the world (p. 59). In contrast to *dabhar* as an auditory (processive) phenomenon, *logos* is primarily a visual (momentary) phenomenon. *Logos* is a gathering of things that can be seen at a glance, and the static implications of the visual are said to infect all Greek thought. Thus Hall interprets Platonic reality as the eternal, immutable and objective arrangement and order of the cosmos" (p. 22).

I find Hall's (and perhaps Kierkegaard's) analysis of Socrates and Plato problematic. Hall portrays Socrates as critiquing the static *logos*-centered world-picture of Greek thought but as unable to formulate any positive principles. Why? "The reason is that Socrates was truly ignorant" (p. 125). How then does one account for the principles Socrates adduces in the *Apology* to explain his actions? What is one to make of the principled way Socrates convinces Crito that he ought not escape prison? Hall's understanding of Socratic irony seems too limited. Similarly, the Plato who recognizes the eros-driven unfolding of insight in experience and reflection (see the *Symposium* and Plato's *Seventh Letter*) and who calls reality ("the sum of things") "all that is unchangeable and all that is in change" (*Sophist* 249D) is not some static thinker trapped in contemplation of the eternal as the only reality.

Although I would argue against the adequacy of Hall's interpretation of Hebrew and Greek thought, and I think Kierkegaard's analysis (or better, the analysis of author A of *Either/Or*) of Christianity as introducing dynamic spirit into the world is highly problematic (after all, early Christian theology rebelled against the spiritualism of Montanism and gnosticism and drew upon the static world view of Platonism rather than the dynamic thought of Plato), nevertheless these problems of historical analysis do not themselves undermine the cogency of Hall's positive theoretical claims. *Word and Spirit* not only indicts the aestheticism of the modern world but pleads for a superior alternative to this aestheticism. Hall works out this positive alternative in terms of speech-act theory indebted to Arendt, Wittgenstein and Austin. Speech is the only medium in which self awareness, the sensuous world, and historical

continuity can all be gathered into fruitful interaction. It has the capacity to encompass past actualities, present alternatives, and future possibilities in a way which makes possible authentic choice. Through a speech-act a subject involved in historical currents can apply principles to situations so as to act responsibly.

Hall puts his positive claim in these terms: “Christianity broke the pagan static synthesis of spirit and the sensuous completely apart by introducing a picture of that relation in which the spirit and the sensuous were at once radically sundered and radically bonded in a dynamic synthesis” (p. 17). In reflecting upon alternatives, a subject transcends (is sundered from) this world; in faithful allegiance to God via imitation of Christ (a bond), a subject is plunged immanently into action in this world, the center of which is one’s neighbor. “The perfect medium for the expression of the sundered/bonded self/world relation is found in the reflexively integral speech-acts” (p. 201).

Hall turns to Michael Polanyi’s epistemology to provide a model of the sundered/bonded relation of spirit to the sensuous. Polanyi’s distinction between subsidiary and focal awareness, grounded in the from/to structure of consciousness, is said to be analogous to the sundered/bonded relation. The from/to dialectic guides Hall’s “attempt to make sense of the Christian conception of spirit as sundered *from* and bonded *to* the sensuous world” (p. 94).

I have trouble following Hall’s argument at this point. Surely the from/to structure can illuminate the sundered/bonded relationship, but that is because all human consciousness is organized according to subsidiary/focal or from/to structures. Pagan consciousness, the various forms of aestheticism—all can be so interpreted. So Polanyi’s thought does little to illuminate what is distinctive about the Christian notion of spirit. Indeed, just as from/to structures seem characteristic of all consciousness, so too does a sundered/bonded relationship. For instance, in his planning to reclaim land from the sea, Faust’s thought would be sundered from the details of a dredging operation--the sand, the sea, dikes--and bonded to a vision of the newly created land.

Kierkegaard is clearer than Hall in articulating what is distinctive about Christian spirituality. For Kierkegaard the key Christian category is faith. Hall tends to equate faith with the act of bonding, but that would not illuminate what is distinctive about Christian faith. For Kierkegaard faith is not just being bonded to something or accepting some idea, for then the pagan, Don Giovanni, and Faust would all have faith. No, faith is a state of consciousness that emerges only through great personal struggle. Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* (Lorrie trans., p. 57) speaks about faith as follows: “Infinite resignation is the last stage prior to faith, so that one who has not made this movement has not faith; for only in the infinite resignation do I become clear to myself with respect to my eternal validity, and only then can there be any question of grasping existence by virtue of faith.” In resignation one gives up the temporal world, but then in faith, one gains it back. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* faith is presented not as something supportive of reason, but as something paradoxical, that is, counter to reason, something grasped with passion (in *Philosophical Fragments*, the paradox of the Eternal entering history). Elsewhere Kierkegaard claims that true faith must be preceded by a conviction of sinfulness that forces one to turn away from self reliance to reliance on God. Faith may be a form of covenantal bonding, as Hall interprets it, but in Kierkegaard it is arrived at only after some form of emotional shipwreck. When these necessary existential movements are added to Hall’s account, then some significance can be seen in the sundered/bonded formula: in agony one is sundered from this world but through faith in the faithful God one is again bonded to it.

I do not mean to imply that Polanyi’s thought is irrelevant to Kierkegaard’s world. Hall helpfully points out that Polanyi’s notion of science as a form of personal knowledge--in contrast to positivism, historicism, or instrumen-

talism--would be consistent with Kierkegaard's emphasis on the passionate individual seeking the truth (see *Word and Spirit*, pp. 166-167 and 193-194, and *PK*, pp. 343-346). The scientist, of course, is a member of a community of investigators who check each other's results; the Kierkegaardian man of faith is preeminently an individual, and what others believe is of no relevance to one's passionate act of faith. But Polanyi describes the act of relying on another's superior knowledge in terms which illuminate the Christian's faith-act of imitating Christ. "By applying his thoughts or deeds as our standards for judging the rightness of our own thoughts and deeds, we surrender our person for the sake of becoming more satisfying to ourselves in the light of these standards. This act is irreversible and also a-critical..." (*PK*, p. 378), a good description of the faith-act (although ignoring its passionate genealogy).

Wouldn't it be more accurate to describe what is distinctive about Christianity in terms of a faith-act rather than in terms of a speech-act? Here is Hall's claim: "For Kierkegaard, spirit is realized concretely and existentially when someone takes up a religious modality of existence (religiousness B). For a person to take up this modality of existence is just for him to take up a reflexively integral relation to his words, which is the same as *speaking faithfully*. That is, the mark and test of the realization of a self is the extent to which a speaker *owns his words, owns up to them, is present in them, and present in them before some other*" (p. 74). To interpret Christian spirituality as a unique form of faithful speech before others (as Hall states on p. 75) is problematic both as an interpretation of Kierkegaard and of Christianity's uniqueness. Religiousness B sounds in Hall's terms more like a Buberian I-Thou relation than a Kierkegaardian passionate embrace of the paradoxical by a suffering individual. Moreover, while there is every reason to praise faithful speech-acts revelatory of a speaker's feelings, it is certainly presumptuous to think that such self disclosure is uniquely Christian.

About the nature of his own spirituality Kierkegaard states that "I can lay no claim to an immediate relationship with God, that I cannot and dare not say that it is He who immediately inserts his thoughts in me, but that my relationship to God is a reflection-relationship, in inwardness in reflection, as in general the distinguishing trait of my individuality is reflection, so that even in prayer my *forte* is thanksgiving" (*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Harper TB, pp. 68-69). Kierkegaard's spirituality rests on the reflective interpretation of an individual, not on a speech-act before others. Better put, the only other to whom Kierkegaard discloses himself is God, and through God the whole enigmatic world. The victory of faith is to believe, often against immediate evidence, that ultimately through God all things work for the good.

The grounds upon which one might take the leap of faith to God are not rational grounds. Just before his death Kierkegaard wrote, "A man of understanding can never become a Christian; the most he can achieve, through the power of imagination, is to play with the Christian problems" (*Papirer*, XI, entry of September 23, 1855). In general agreement, Polanyi states that God is "not a being whose existence can be established in some logical, scientific, or rational way before we engage in our worship of him. God is a commitment involved in our rites and myths" (*Meaning*, p. 156). Polanyi's analysis also supports Kierkegaard's view that Christian spirituality reflectively uses the notion of God to bring the ambiguous complexity of the world into focus. "Through our integrative, imaginative efforts we see [God] as the focal point that fuses into meaning all the incompatibles involved in the practice of religion" (*Ibid.*).

Next, however, Polanyi seems to challenge Kierkegaard's (and Hall's) postulation of a great gap between the aesthetic and the religious modes of being. He states that "as in art—only in a more whole and complete way—God also becomes the integration of all the incompatibles in our lives" (*Ibid.*). Is belief in God for Polanyi merely a poetic creation of the imagination, a way to harmonize the challenges of daily life in a soothing (escapist) vision of the whole?

This is what Hall charges Polanyi with in Hall's review of *Meaning* (see *Zygon* 17:1 [March, 1982], 16-18). In contrast, Hall sides with Kierkegaard by understanding Christianity as primarily an existential affair involving the whole self in daily actions.

In defense of Polanyi, I would first point out that Polanyi differs from Kierkegaard in his assessment of aesthetic experience. For Kierkegaard to live aesthetically is to avoid commitment and retain possibility. One thus hides as a person. But for Polanyi the visionary art of the late 19th and 20th centuries has created new worlds in the imagination which both undermine old worlds and yet allow individuals to enrich their lives with new insights. "It is only the artist who detaches himself as an artist from himself as a private individual and embodies this artistic person in his work. Scientists cannot do this. But therefore all art is intensely personal *and* strictly detached; and it must, as we said, claim universal validity for the personal self-set standards which it obeys" (*Meaning*, p. 102). Because art involves a personal dimension of experience transfigured into a form that claims universal validity, Polanyi does not see the artistic creator or the admiring public as escaping from this world. Through acknowledgment of standards in art possibility is narrowed and commitment enjoined—just the opposite of what Kierkegaard's aesthete aims for.

Second, I would refer again to the way Polanyi's remarks about God and religion are generally consistent with what Kierkegaard states. A close reading of Polanyi indicates that he believes religious meaning enables a person to cope with all the conflicting demands of everyday life; the religious believer need not give way to some partial (idolatrous) solution to life's dilemmas such as Marxism, building self esteem, giving way to materialistic impulses—or hiding in aestheticism. "In Pauline Christianity. . . faith and hope have an object. We dwell in the hope that we may, by the grace of God, be able somewhere, somehow, to do that which we must, but which we can at this moment see no way to do—or else trust, if we should never receive that grace, that it is best that we do not do it. Dwelling in this religious frame of mind, we have not lost the tension, but it neither worries us nor do we become complacent. . . . Rather, we are humbled before God in the recognition of our utter dependence upon him for the ultimate victory through Christ" (*Meaning*, p. 157). Hall might correctly note that a dominant theme in this passage is hope, not present existential engagement, but surely there are also resources for responsible action here and now in Polanyi's view. It is too extreme to label Polanyi's notion of religious meaning as simply a form of aestheticism in Kierkegaard's sense.

In *Word and Spirit*, Ronald Hall develops a notion of Christian spirituality which utilizes Kierkegaardian formulation, is centered in speech-acts, and engages current issues thoughtfully. The book illuminates the existential dimension of living in a manner which can usefully extend the conceptions of a variety of thinkers, including those working in Polyanian terms.

An Apology for the "Second Edition": A Reply to Gulick's Review Essay

Ronald L. Hall

I certainly owe Walter Gulick an apology. Those darn publishers! How dare they issue a second edition of my book, making substantial changes in it, and without even telling me! I only wish that Gulick had seen the first edition. I think many of the criticisms that he makes would disappear. I will restrict myself to just a few examples of what I am talking about.

Gulick says that I tend to equate faith with the act of bonding. He then goes on to correct this reading of faith saying that it needs to be dialectically supplemented with the idea that such a bonding can occur “only after some form of emotional shipwreck.” If I were true to Kierkegaard, he implies, I would have said something like this: “in agony one is *sundered* from this world but through faith in the faithful God one is again *bonded* to it” In the first edition of my book, this is exactly what I did say, over and over, from beginning to end. In the first edition I consistently said that faith was a double movement, not simply a matter of bonding. As I put it, faith is a *sundered/bonded* relation--in fact this was my point! Note on page 3 of *Word and Spirit* (Vol. I): “Because faith establishes simultaneously two relations...it requires a *double movement*...to exist in faith is to exist within a radical covenantal bonding to God *and* to exist within a dialectical *sundered/bonded* relation to the world.”

The publishers also radically changed a major point of my first edition. I originally went to great lengths to say that both Don Giovanni and Faust were defined by the fact that their existence was exclusively defined in terms of their being musically *sundered* from the world, and that the pagan was defined as existing in a pre-*sundered* relation to the cosmos that could not be thought of as a bonded relation, since the bonded relation is dialectically connected to *sundering*. According to the edition that Gulick read, the pagan, DG and Faust all exist in a bonded relation to something.

I will just mention in summary fashion several other similar changes in the second edition of my book. (1) In the edition that Gulick read, it seems that I represent the aesthete as celebrating human freedom. In fact, in my earlier rendering, it is just human freedom that the aesthete dreads, just that condition he flees. (2) In the first edition, I stressed the idea that Kierkegaardian faith has been misread as being a condition of the isolated individual. As I argue, seeing that faithful speech-act is the primary mode of faithful existence for SK, is just to see that faith is, as Kierkegaard himself defines it, a relation--and not simply a private relation with God. Gulick didn't get this, since he continues to (mis)read Kierkegaard as advocating a strictly private notion of faith. (3) Similar to this last point, Gulick continues to read Kierkegaard as advocating the notion that faith is found only in worldless individualism. In the first edition, I try to show that there are grounds for thinking that for SK faith is essentially a worldly matter, a condition found only in the presence of others. (4) And Gulick continues to play the old saw according to which Kierkegaardian faith is essentially an irrational leap. And again, in the first edition, I went to great lengths to counter this reading of SK. (5) Finally, just a point in passing: Gulick argues that Socrates stood for positive principles--as much as Plato-- and was not simply, as SK reads him, one who hovered in “The Clouds” of infinite ironic ignorance. The evidence he gives is from the

Apology. In this apology I simply remind Gulick that it was Plato who wrote that dialogue. Like Jesus, Socrates never wrote anything. What either actually stood for is, I suspect, up for discussion.

Let me turn from these issues to what may be of more interest to the readers of this journal: Michael Polanyi. Gulick makes two points.

First, Gulick claims that if the sundered/bonded relation of spirit is, as I suggest, formally analogous to the Polanyian from-to relation, then Christianity cannot be thought to be innovative, as being the first to bring spirit into the world. This is so, Gulick argues, since all consciousness, pre-Christian included, is from-to in its structure, and therefore sundered/bonded in structure. I can only speculate that Gulick thinks this because the second edition of my book must have left out a main theme of the first, namely, the importance of world-pictures, a concept that Gulick does not mention. My claim in the first edition is that it was a new world-picture that Christianity introduced that allowed the from-to/sundered/bonded self-world relation to be vested with its rights, and hence for spirit to come forth in all of its existential reality and power. The self has always been a from-to relation, but not always a relation that was able to relate itself to itself. Spirit has always existed in the world but not always actualized as spirit. Christianity provided for the first time a world-picture that would allow the sundered/bonded self-world relation its full existential ratification.

But even on Polanyi's own terms, need consciousness (meaning?) always be of the sundered/bonded sort, even if always from-to? In *PK*, p. 58, Polanyi distinguished two kinds of meaning. He even goes so far as to say that the more clear cut notion of meaning of the two is the sort of meaning involved when a word means something. Here we must look from the word to its meaning, look through it as it were, negative the sensuous, to put it in SK's terminology. This meaning he calls denotive, or representational; it is what I call semantic meaning proper. This is the sort of meaning that most formally parallels the sundered/bonded relation established in reflexively integral speech. The other kind of meaning, what Polanyi says is the more problematic of the two, is what he calls existential. In this kind of meaning, what is meant is not what is pointed to, but is intrinsic to the pattern that embodies it. It still, however, has a from-to structure. This second kind of meaning (syntax?) is what I call aesthetic meaning. Moreover, Polanyi is correct, as I see it, to associate this kind of meaning with the abstract arts and mathematics. He says, "Instead of denoting something [paintings, music, mathematics, the abstract arts in general]...emphatically present their own striking sensuous presence" (*PK*, 195-196). The innovation of Christianity was to provide the world-picture necessary to vest semantic meaning and speech with its rights. This properly semantic sense of the from-to relation is a helpful model for making sense of how spirit as spirit negatives the sensuous, of how the self as spirit is both sundered from and bonded to the sensuous world in felicitous speech of how the word becomes flesh.

Secondly, there is the matter of the great gap between the aesthetic and the existential. For my position on this see my article in *Zygon* that Gulick cites. For now, let me just mention a confusion that Gulick suffers toward the end of his review. He confuses the work of the artist with an aesthetic mode of existence. An artist need not be an aesthete, and essentially could not be in her actual practice as an artist. And the same goes for the scientist. I thought this was Polanyi's point. The scientist rightly strives for theories that have intrinsic worth, theories that stand on their own, and the artist strives to create works that also have such independent value. This striving is deeply personal, but the products of this striving come to have a detached life of their own. When life is modeled on the "work" of the artist--in the sense of the finished product that is essentially detached from the particular agent of its creation--rather than on the "work" of the artist--in the sense of the deeply personal creative process--then we have reached the aesthetic modality. In the existential modality, it is action that is the aim, and action can never, without an essential distortion,

be detached from the subjectivity of some concrete particular agent who enacts it in the presence of another.

For the aesthete, the truth is either independent of the subject (the psychological aesthete), or does not exist (the pneumatic aesthete); for the existentialist, the truth is subjectivity. In this sense, Polanyi is an existentialist; but, sad to say, an existentialist who later in life absorbed more than he realized of the aestheticism of the culture he sought so valiantly to criticize.

Notes on Contributors

Paul Nagy is Chair and Professor of Philosophy and Professor of American Studies at the Indianapolis Campus of Indiana University. In addition to Polanyi, his teaching and research interests focus on ethics and classical pragmatism.

Marjorie Grene is a philosopher whose interest in Polanyi's thought goes back almost fifty years, according to Polanyi's own testimony in the "Acknowledgments" section of *Personal Knowledge*. Polanyi recognized the importance of Grene's contribution to his magnum opus. If you read the correspondence in the Polanyi Archives at the University of Chicago, it is easy to see that Grene's influence upon Polanyi's developing philosophical ideas was very significant, perhaps more than any other living philosopher. Grene taught at more than a dozen European and American colleges and universities; she is the author of many articles and books and is especially interested in philosophy and biology. Most *TAD* readers probably know Grene as the editor of Polanyi's *Knowing and Being* and as the author of *The Knower and the Known* (1966), a book that makes good use of Polanyi's epistemology to discuss the problems and the transformation of the epoch of philosophical thought beginning in the seventeenth century.

Walter Gulick is concluding several semesters as interim Academic Vice Chancellor at Montana State University, Billings, where he has been a faculty member for many years. Gulick was a Fulbright Scholar at the Technical University of Budapest in the Spring term of 1993 where he helped produce an early English issue of *Polanyiana*. Several of Gulick's essays have appeared in *TAD* and he also serves as the Book Review editor.

Ron Hall is a philosopher who teaches at Francis Marion University in Florence, South Carolina. In addition to his recent book *Word and Spirit: A Kierkegaardian Critique of The Modern Age*, Hall has published a number of articles which make use of Polanyian ideas. Hall has frequently been a presenter or respondent (and will again this Fall) at the Polanyi Society meeting held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society for Biblical Literature; he was instrumental in setting up the 1994 session honoring William Poteat.