

Construing Polanyi's Tacit Knowing as Knowing by Acquaintance Rather than Knowing by Representation: Some Implications

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, tacit knowing, acquaintance knowing, representational knowing, representational theory of perception, post-critical, conceptual mediation.

This essay proposes that Polanyi's tacit knowing – specifically his conception of tacit knowing as cognitive contact with reality – should be construed as fundamentally a knowing by acquaintance – a relational knowing of reality, rather than merely the underlying subsidiary component of explicit representational knowledge. Thus construed, Polanyi's theory that tacit knowing is foundational to all human knowing is more radical than is often supposed, for it challenges the priority status of explicit representational knowledge relative to tacit acquaintance knowledge, which has been the dominant paradigm for most of the Western epistemological tradition.

Introduction

Michael Polanyi's chief contribution to philosophy according to Marjorie Grene, perhaps his most well known and respected interpreter in philosophy, is his theory of tacit knowing. Whether or not all interpreters of Polanyi would agree it is his chief contribution, there is no controversy among them over it being a major contribution to philosophy and to epistemology in particular. What ramifications it has for the whole range of traditional issues in epistemology is another matter however. It is my thesis that the implications are more radical than is usually noticed.

My aim in this paper is to highlight some of the lesser noticed implications of Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing by utilizing the commonsense distinction between knowing by acquaintance and knowing by representation (reflecting the linguistic distinction between *connaître* and *savoir* in French, and between *kennen* and *wissen* in German). I should explain right off that one source of the connection I will be drawing has been my efforts to comprehend and interpret for students where and how Polanyi's ideas relate to traditional ideas in epistemology as reflected in widely used introductory textbooks. Typically there, commonsense notions of (a) acquaintance knowledge, (b) skill knowledge, and (c) descriptive, propositional knowledge are briefly described, only to be left behind for the sake of an exclusive focus upon the last as the principal concern of epistemology. It has gradually come clear to me that obtaining a greater hearing for Polanyi's epistemological ideas among philosophers will come only from taking acquaintance knowledge (along with skill knowledge) into account much more seriously than is conventionally done. Reciprocally, insight from Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing will lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of acquaintance knowledge.

We all know very well in ordinary commonsense contexts how to distinguish, for example, between *knowing* a person (first hand) – say, Michael Polanyi – and *knowing about* Polanyi, or between *knowing* the city of Chicago (first hand) and *knowing some about, or even a great deal about*, the city of Chicago. Knowing about

Polanyi and knowing about Chicago doesn't require personal connection or presence – one can learn and come to know *about* something or someone at second-hand, by way of hearing or reading the (presumably accurate) representation of Polanyi, or of Chicago, by others — whereas direct acquaintance knowing requires relationship, direct connection, some kind of first-hand familiarity and rapport with the reality known. O.K., so what's the point? The point I wish to make is that this distinction is not only worthy of philosophical attention in itself but that it can help us understand better much of what Polanyi is about in relation to mainstream philosophical epistemology.

When it comes to philosophical reflection on the distinction between knowing by acquaintance and knowing by representation and figuring out what knowing by acquaintance in particular means – just like Augustine reflecting on the nature of time in his *Confessions* – we can find ourselves at a loss. Our practical, pre-reflective, working understanding of the distinction easily dissipates, leaving us with little to go on but assorted accounts that have come down to us of what philosophers have said about the nature of knowledge. As a matter of fact, relatively little has been written in the history of Western philosophy about knowing by acquaintance and its relation to explicit knowing. Almost everything that has been written has been occupied preferentially with explicit, representational knowledge, from Plato forward. (This is not to say that knowing by acquaintance has never been taken into account or given some kind of recognition, however.) It is well to recognize that it is not an easy and straightforward thing to reflect philosophically on this kind of knowing. One reason is that the usual ruts of philosophical reflection are directed almost exclusively to sorting out explicit, representational knowledge. Another reason is that, as Polanyi points out,¹ it is possible to reflect critically upon something only by rendering it explicit. But if acquaintance knowledge is not itself explicit, how are we to reflect upon it critically to understand it? I will have more to say about this below.

Not surprisingly, much of what has been done in explicating Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing has focused on bringing to light what Polanyi contends to be *the underlying subsidiary component of all explicit, representational knowing*: that *from* which one attends when attending *to* the explicit focus of such knowing. All awareness, all comprehension, all knowing – Polanyi's work discloses – has an irreducible *from-to* polar structure, even the most explicit, representational knowledge of the sort found in the physical sciences. The “*to*” pole of this structure is the focus of our awareness (which may or may not be explicitly rendered²). In explicit, representational knowledge, that *to* which we are attending is the explicit representation. (This claim will be qualified somewhat in the section below called “Mediated Acquaintance Knowing.”) But the “*from*” pole of this structure encompasses a host of subsidiary particulars and/or clues, some inside our bodies and some outside our bodies, of which we are subsidiarily aware in relying on them to make coherent sense of that *to* which we are attending. Some of these we can specify and switch our focal attention to (at the expense of momentarily losing our focus on what we had been focally attending to); others we can only do so with difficulty or in a general and non specific way; and still others we may not be able to specify at all. Again, much of what has been done in explicating Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing focuses on the “*from*” or subsidiary dimension of explicit knowing – the dimension which goes for the most part unsaid, unreflected, and unacknowledged in conventional philosophical accounts of knowledge.

All that is well and good. However, tacit knowledge includes far more than the subsidiary component of our knowledge and awareness (whether the focus of our awareness be explicit or not).³ Though it may at times appear so, nothing that I shall have to say in what follows about tacit knowing should be taken as opposing efforts to recognize and bring to light tacit knowing as the taken for granted coefficient and ground of explicit knowing.⁴ The predominant paradigm of knowing in such explications, however, remains explicit, representational

knowing while bringing to light aspects that for the most part heretofore have gone unnoticed and unsaid in such knowing.

On occasions where tacit knowing is considered above and beyond its being a subsidiary dimension of explicit knowing by explicators of Polanyi's views, the focus has usually been on skillful *know-how*, as in the embodied working knowledge and complex performances found in traditional arts and traditional crafts, as well as in athletic feats. Polanyi's own commonsense examples of tacit knowing are often of this sort (e.g., hammering a nail, riding a bicycle, swimming). These sorts of cases are sufficiently distinct from knowledge of things beyond ourselves, from knowledge of objective reality (these cases being clear cut cases of practical knowledge rather than theoretical knowledge, to use the traditional Aristotelian distinction), to leave undisturbed and unchallenged the assumption *that the only sort of knowledge of reality there is, is explicit, representational knowledge*. The theory of tacit knowledge, while correctly recognized to be a radical challenge to the possibility of a wholly explicit knowledge, is thus not seen to be also a pointed challenge to this other assumption. The conventional philosophical predisposition among explicators of Polanyi to place primary emphasis on representative knowledge as well risks losing sight of Polanyi's challenge to the predominant modern understanding of *sense perception as representational* (i.e., of sense perception as reducible to sense impressions or sense data, or brain states), rather than as *relational contact and rapport* with realities perceived. Thus only rarely is *tacit knowing as cognitive contact with reality* (not just cognitive contact with explicit concepts or other mental representations) been seriously taken up by Polanyi interpreters⁵ – though this theme is both present in and central to Polanyi's own account. This suggests to me that *tacit knowing as an experiential, relational acquaintance with reality beyond ourselves* (in addition to whatever else it is) has yet to be fully acknowledged and appreciated even among Polanyi interpreters.

My specific proposal in this paper is that Polanyi's notion of tacit knowing as cognitive contact with reality⁶ should be construed as fundamentally *a knowing by acquaintance* – a *relational* knowing of reality by acquaintance. Thus conceived, it is something distinguishable from possession of an accurate representation of reality (though it may well be accompanied by such a representation). Indeed, more than distinct from the latter, tacit knowing as cognitive contact with reality is for Polanyi in every case prior to, alongside and undergirding, extended by yet ultimately reaching beyond, whatever explicit knowledge we may have.

Simultaneously but inversely, those who seek to understand more fully what relational knowing by acquaintance is all about can find in Polanyi's account of tacit knowing as cognitive contact with reality an invaluable resource for comprehending its nature, its importance, and its difference from explicit, representative knowledge. In this connection, Polanyi highlights a range of distinctive elements of tacit knowing: a knowing by indwelling through the extension of (and interiorization into) our lived bodies of tools, probes, articulate frameworks, etc.; the stretch of attention (our active, lived, embodied attention) linking attending-from and attending-to; embodied skillful performance; the investment of one's person in both the quest of discovery, the making known of a discovery to others, and the ongoing recognition of that discovery in relation to the evolving understanding of the range of things that includes it; the a-critical groping to integrate disparate clues into a meaningful whole; the faith-filled following up of intimations of as yet unmanifest coherencies; a contact with reality that apprehends and anticipates its capacity to manifest itself inexhaustibly, etc. My proposal is that these elements can and should be understood as components of a relational knowing of reality by acquaintance.

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to establishing the propriety of this interpretation of tacit knowing and bringing to light some of its revolutionary implications for epistemology generally.

The Significance of the Shift to a Post-Critical Orientation

A crucial factor to be taken into account in sorting through what Polanyi means by tacit knowing is *the shift in philosophical orientation from critical to post-critical* that Polanyi sought to bring about, and how that shift bears on epistemological issues. Polanyi's most important philosophical work, *Personal Knowledge*, stemming from his Gifford Lectures, is subtitled "Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy." The bearing of this shift from a critical to a post-critical orientation on explicating tacit knowing is easily overlooked. There are many aspects to the shift which are not easy to summarize in a brief compass. Not all are particularly relevant to understanding the issues dealt with in this essay, but some are. Perhaps the most relevant of these can be captured briefly in terms of *a shift from a priority of emphasis upon methodological skepticism to a priority of emphasis upon methodological faith – but in a special sense*: a shift from (a) a priority of emphasis upon methodological skepticism toward what access to truth we (and anyone else) have in our own persons (suspiciously regarding such presumed access as fraught with "subjectivity"), requiring us to distance ourselves from the subject matter and relate to it impersonally, to (b) a priority of emphasis upon methodological faith in that personal access, motivating us to draw near to the subject matter in a manner that will bring it to light.⁷ Differently put, the shift is from detached, self-critical reserve to active, first-personal exploration. In words Polanyi uses to describe this aspect of the shift in *Personal Knowledge*, it is from a detached, "non-committal orientation" in our cognitive endeavors to a "committal orientation." ("Committal" here does not mean commitment to a given statement of belief or to some specific outcome but rather a passionate personal commitment to the pursuit of truth concerning the subject matter in question, truth as transcending and never fully grasped by any particular explicit rendering.) It is crucially important to realize that this shift is key to bringing to light the full significance of what Polanyi meant by tacit knowing. Without it, the requisite personal relationship of the knower to the known in active exploratory knowing will continue to be overlooked.

Despite its importance, it is easy, terribly easy to mistake what the shift from methodological skepticism to methodological faith means (so I have found in attempting to explain this concept to students and to colleagues). The methodological faith to which Polanyi gives priority is not at all a standpoint of uncritical credulity or subjectivism. To many it seems so because the critical perspective induces us to imagine ourselves not in an active exploratory relationship to reality but as confronted with competing explicit candidates for belief, which we are given critically to doubt or uncritically to believe. In such a situation, Polanyi's proposal of methodological faith seems on the surface to counsel uncritical belief. But the shift that Polanyi proposes opens up beyond deciding between explicit representations (and beyond the alternatives of critical doubt or uncritical belief) a whole other dimension and a whole other response: the tacit, unarticulated dimension of the reality which these representations purport to map (which Polanyi maintains is inexhaustible), to which we have cognitive access in our own persons as we reach out to explore it for ourselves and in our own persons in *a-critical* (neither critical nor uncritical) methodological faith.⁸ The crucial thing to recognize is that we are blind and insensible to this dimension and to this response apart from the methodological faith which seeks and ventures in one's own person to find hidden truth, the deployment and investment of oneself in seeking which takes notice of the clues and intimations which point the way. The methodological faith in question is thus directed not to explicit candidates for belief (even ones we happen to come up with ourselves) but to our access to this dimension and our investigative forays into it – i.e., to truth as transcendental: as apprehendable (in part) yet also transcending our own best efforts to render it.

The methodological skepticism that more or less defines the *critical* orientation of modern thought is

marked by critical suspicion toward subjectivity as such – not only toward bias, preconception, prejudice, etc., but also toward the possibility that truth might come to light through personal relationship and involvement. Hence it counsels withdrawal, detachment, a withholding of assent and of investment of self – for the purpose of countering and calling into question what is deemed to be *subjective* and *credulous* tendencies in ourselves and in human thought and culture generally. So, in order to avoid the errors of over-belief, critical thought adopts a posture of under-belief and critical suspicion toward every candidate for belief as possibly a projection of subjectivity (whether of others or of oneself) – i.e., *doubt (that is, doubt subjectivity, withhold one's investing of oneself in the evident possibilities) unless the candidate first proves itself worthy of belief* – including, take note, whatever one may be in the process of creatively articulating for oneself on the basis of direct personal involvement in the matters in question. What it fails to recognize is that this strategy undercuts and calls into question all sorts of knowing that critically depend upon relating oneself personally to those matters.

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi calls this fundamental strategy radically into question, contending that adoption of methodological skepticism across the board (at least where it is most seriously adopted and consistently followed through) represses, interferes with, and in some cases actually debilitates, *the personal fiduciary powers that enable us to transcend the distortions of subjectivity and credulousness and achieve contact with objective reality*. To the contrary, a post-critical philosophical orientation, fully aware of the inescapable fallibility of these powers (an awareness gained in large measure from the insights produced by the modern critical tradition), nevertheless recognizes that *these powers of methodological believing (i.e., of personal indwelling, of following up and integrating clues to hidden truth, of struggling to articulate what is only vaguely sensed, etc.) are ultimately our only resort* – being the wellspring of all genuine discovery and creativity.⁹ A post-critical philosophical orientation therefore adopts the inverse methodological strategy: *believe (that is, believe in this quest for truth in one's own person) unless, and until, there arises good reason to doubt (that is, doubt toward the current mode of investing oneself in seeking)* – in other words, trust, indwell, venture, put yourself into it, until there arises good reason to withdraw and withhold yourself. Its priority is more upon seeking truth – truth yet unknown or incompletely understood – than avoiding error, more upon finding meaning than avoiding deception. To attain truth one must, again and again, risk being wrong. The critical strategy is to minimize the risk of being wrong. The post-critical strategy realizes that minimizing the risk in this way maximizes the loss of truth and meaning.¹⁰

Thus a *post-critical* orientation of reflective thought is characterized by methodological believing no less than methodological doubting, empathetic exploration of perspectives beyond one's own no less than critical suspicion, reaching out and indwelling no less than withdrawal and detachment, venturing into the unknown, “pouring oneself” into the particulars of a problem in pursuit of a hidden coherence, and investing oneself in a quest to discover and bring to light some important truth no less than withholding oneself. The latter in each case continues to have its place. But the former has a relatively higher or first priority: less absence than presence, less an absencing of the self of the knower from what is known than an appropriate, responsible drawing near and becoming present of the knower to the known in however partial, aspectual, and incomplete a way. Thereby, instead of seeking approximation to some universal, ‘objective,’ depersonalized knower – formally indistinguishable from every other ‘objective’ knower from having suppressed all that situates and incarnates her knowing as unique and distinct from that of other knowers – the knower forthrightly discloses and acknowledges the situatedness, partiality, and fallibility of her knowing in the world alongside other knowers while nevertheless affirming her findings with universal intent.¹¹ She does so in the faith that this situatedness does not separate her from reality but, taken up actively in quest of truth, connects her with it. Her knowing, her finite situated being, her person, on the one hand, and her connection with the known, her contact with the known,

on the other, are inseparable. Knowing thus conceived is incarnate, in the world, in relationship and rapport with what is known. Thereby, as well, the knower becomes knowable, or rather is knowable, in her knowing. The knower is not located (isolated) in some Cartesian discarnate interior – nor in the neural networks of her cerebral cortex – inaccessible to other fellow-knowers, but, via empathetic indwelling, commonsensically alongside other persons, knowable and known in her knowing. The tacit dimension of human knowing which Polanyi brings to our attention encompasses all this.

A critical preoccupation with explicit, representational knowledge as the primary or paradigm kind of knowledge, *without locating it within this commonsense context of the tacit relatedness, presence, and connection of knower to known highlighted by a post-critical perspective*, perpetuates the conception of a detached, abstracted dis-relationship of knower to known that has been standard fare in mainstream epistemology since Descartes, especially given the predisposing precedents of modern critical reflection on human knowledge to which we have become habituated. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi identifies this dis-relationship as the result of an artificial, non-committal construal of the knowing situation for detached skeptical reflection¹² – i.e., a *critical construal* as distinct from a *post-critical construal* – a construal lacking the methodological faith-filled investment of the self of the critically reflecting person that appraises and acknowledges the knower in her knowing. Polanyi's point is that non-committal, critical reflection is not at all the neutral methodology we have supposed it to be; it changes and distorts both our apprehension and our conception of the knowing situation by withdrawing from it an essential tacit fiduciary component – namely our own responsible personal appraisal of it which both integrates the subsidiary parts of that situation into a meaningful whole and apprehends the meaning that those parts have within the integrated whole. In short (and oversimplified a bit), it renders what normally is subsidiary into something focal. Just as we lose our perception of the whole of some perceptual gestalt (say, of the meaning of what a friend is saying) by switching our attention to the part (e.g., the sound of his words), so also we lose our sense of the knowing situation as a whole when in a non-committal way we critically attend focally (not just temporarily for the sake of reintegration but through a reductive analysis) to its parts – especially in the absence of taking into account our essential role as responsible appraiser of the act of knowing in question. We may gain some by the ensuing critical analysis, but we risk losing or distorting the meaning of any of its parts when that part is considered in abstraction from its subsidiary contribution to the integral whole of which it is a part, and in abstraction from our contribution as appraiser.

The paradigmatically critical construal by Descartes of the knowing situation led him (and others in his wake to the present day) to certain fateful conceptual moves based on the resultant fragmentation of the knowing situation and loss of meaning to its parts. I summarize several of them here, all too briefly. (1) Sense perception, through which we reach out, explore, and indwell the world believably, once subjected to skeptical scrutiny became focally construed by Descartes and subsequently by the British Empiricists as nothing more than *sense impressions (sense data) internal to the mind, detached from that of which they are the impressions*. Indeed, when considered in a detached, non-committal, focalized way, absent the active involvement of the knower perceptually apprehending some aspect of the surrounding world, they do come *to seem as if* they are discrete “sense data.” (2) Our mindful self, the knowing subject, which in ordinary circumstances trustingly indwells the world, once reflected on itself in detached skeptical reflection became focally construed by Descartes and his intellectual progeny *as a world-less (non-extended) closed container* (re: the Leibnizian monad), acquainted solely with what is internal to itself and having no means of access, no direct connection or rapport (except speculatively by way of inference), to what lies beyond itself. The point: when considered in this detached, non-committal way, the mind comes to seem *as if it were* a world-less, closed container. (3) The world, which is known and explored through trustful indwelling, once skeptically contemplated under a

condition of minimal indwelling became focally construed, again by Descartes and his intellectual progeny, *as altogether objectified* (e.g., *the world as a machine*), *a world devoid of any subject, any inwardness* – and devoid of achievement and of meaning as well (including the embodied achievements of other knowers, both animal and human). (4) The commonsense access we enjoy to the minds of other persons, which is had through empathetic indwelling, when considered in skeptical detachment became unintelligible, a ‘non-access’ (resulting thereby in “the problem of other minds”), with the result that mutual recognition of things-sensed-in-common amidst multiple perspectives became literally inconceivable.¹³ And (5) the tools, probes, conceptual frameworks, and articulate theories, which when subsidiarily indwelt in pursuit of contact with objective reality transparently extend the reach of our tacit powers far beyond initial appearances, once contemplated focally in themselves come to seem opaque, mere “constructions” by the mind out of the data of sense impressions – not *means of presence* and rapport but *signs of absence* – indicators of both the absence of the indwelling subject and the absence of the transcendent *Ding an sich* beyond our explicit grasp. Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing enables us to understand these fateful conceptual renderings in the history of modern thought for what they are: in each case, a perceptual distortion and a distorted conceptual rendering produced by withholding (or reducing to a minimum) the active involvement and self-relationship of the knower with the known (plus the active involvement and self-relationship of ourselves as knowing appraisers of the knower-known relationship) and shifting our focal attention from the whole of that relationship to its subsidiary parts. Polanyi’s theory doesn’t just help us to understand them, however: for the theory of tacit knowing enables us to realize that these conceptual renderings are neither necessary nor fated, and that we can and should overturn them by re-locating our knowing within the commonsense context of its tacit relatedness to the realities we know.

In sum, the world, and our experience of it, does not disclose its meaning nor does it reveal its hidden structure except as we venture actively to enter, explore, and indwell it, believably. Critical reflection and analysis, which withholds and suspends this active relating of oneself to the world, does have its place, yes – a rightful and important place – *but subordinate to relational knowing by acquaintance*. It is relational knowing by acquaintance which connects us to reality, not non-committally rendered, explicit knowing. Polanyi’s post-critical theory of tacit knowing opens up a way to understand, appreciate, and recover this priority of relational knowing by acquaintance.

Tacit Knowing as Knowledge by Acquaintance

What in brief is knowledge by acquaintance and how does Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing shed light upon it?

Knowledge by acquaintance (more precisely phrased, *knowing* by acquaintance – emphasizing knowing as an activity in the way Polanyi typically does) is first-hand familiarity, bodily indwelling; it cannot be had at second-hand, though someone else might introduce me to it (or initiate me into it). What can be had at second-hand at a distance from the thing known is knowledge by representation, knowledge *about* something, information *about* it. It is an achievement, though a different sort of achievement than is explicit knowledge. Knowledge by acquaintance is direct relationship or contact – personal presence with – a relationship of greater or lesser depth and extent. It is not mere physical proximity, for it requires openness, receptivity, and indwelling. Though we may succeed in talking about it, being an active (indeed, *interactive*) relationship of the knower to the known, it is *essentially* tacit. It is not just essentially tacit in its subsidiary dimension; it is tacit as well in its *from-to* relational stretch of attention. It is lived or enacted tacitly in one’s being as knower. To articulate

it (to the extent it is or can be articulated) – i.e., to render it explicit – is not strictly speaking to make the acquaintance explicit, for it cannot, *as a relationship of acquaintance*, be made explicit (i.e., transformed into something itself explicit). We can, of course, call attention to it, speak of it, and describe it. And we can speak of what we have come to learn through the acquaintance. But to “articulate it” is to create something else on its basis – namely, a representation which is not itself the relationship which acquaintance is. It is to create a “map” of the “territory” with which one is acquainted.¹⁴ (Alternatively, it may be to create a representation, an objectification, of the acquaintance relationship itself but – as is true of every objectification – at one remove from it.) Knowledge by representation is possession of a map – how good a knowledge will depend, of course, on how accurate is the map for present purposes. Knowledge by acquaintance, though, is not itself possession of a map; it is direct familiarity, a direct relationship of first-person rapport with the territory. How good our acquaintance knowledge is will depend on many things: how thorough our acquaintance, how and in what different ways we have interacted with what we are acquainted with, etc. It might be acquired in part with the help of a map. It serves as the basis on which we intelligently utilize a map. And it may be a basis on which maps are constructed – indeed, quite readily, as we draw up an account for reflection and/or communication what it is we have become acquainted with. But it is not itself possession of a map, for we can possess a map without any acquaintance for ourselves with the territory. Possession of a map, no matter how accurate the map, is never equivalent to knowledge by acquaintance of the territory, no matter how much we may suppose that it suffices.

Knowledge by acquaintance, in contrast with knowledge by representation, has built into it an awareness of the transcendence of the territory known (part of what Polanyi means by his thesis that we know more than we can say), an awareness of the way in which the territory not only escapes one’s ability to give it complete articulation but also how it always intimates aspects yet to be explored relative to one’s present, limited perspective on it – i.e., how it is capable of manifesting itself in new and different ways, even surprising ways, in our future experience of it as well as in the experiences of others who approach it from their perspectives. In Polanyi’s words, “Perception has this inexhaustible profundity because what we perceive is an aspect of reality, and aspects of reality are clues to boundless, undisclosed, and perhaps yet unthinkable experiences.”¹⁵ This is a capacity of the territory to manifest itself not just in future experience of one’s own but also in experiences of the same territory by other persons of different perspective possibly simultaneous with one’s own perspective. The intimated transcendence is mutual; we recognize that we each are acquainted with the same thing yet of somewhat different aspects of it, for we are acquainted with it in unique ways. Indeed the idea of different perspectives doesn’t make sense except in this sort of concrete context where knowledge by acquaintance (as distinct from knowledge by representation) has its home: we each recognize that each of us simultaneously sees the same thing differently because we see each other looking at it from different angles relative to each other. Moreover, knowledge by acquaintance is in touch with the “otherness” of the territory in a still different, remarkable way; its being in touch with aspects of the territory lying beyond present articulation is precisely what gives rise to creative new articulations (new mappings and revisions of old mappings) and recognition that some aspects of the territory may simply be beyond our present powers of articulation.

The classic account of the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge by representation identifies belief, truth, and justification. Now it may be, as some have recently contended, that there is something wrong-headed about specifying a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge as such, as if knowledge were a single thing in the entire family of things we would like to call knowledge. Nevertheless, it may throw some further light on knowledge by acquaintance to consider the classical conditions here in their simplest, least qualified form. According to the classic account, for a person *to know that p* (where *p* is a statement) in this sense requires (i) that the person believe that *p*, (ii) that *p* be so (i.e., be true), and (iii) that the

person have and be able to provide reasoned justification that *p* is so. Analogous *but not identical* conditions would seem to hold for knowledge by acquaintance. For a person *to be acquainted with x* requires (i) that the person have confidence in their familiarity with *x*, (ii) that the person's alleged familiarity be an actual relationship of familiarity with *x* (i.e., be in responsive rapport with how *x* is), and (iii) that the person be able to convincingly establish for others her acquaintance with *x*, e.g., by introducing them in person to *x*, or otherwise doing and saying things that reflect a directly familiarity with *x*. Polanyi's account of apprenticeship knowing, both within science and outside of science, illustrates this beautifully – precisely in those situations where we cannot come close to providing convincing explicit justification of our knowledge for persons not already acquainted with the matter in question. Polanyi's insistence that we know more than we can say, and more than we can explicitly justify, is in large part a result of his recognition, not just of the tacit dimension of our explicit knowledge, but specifically of the range and extent of our knowledge by acquaintance.

Digression on Knowing by Acquaintance in Western Philosophy

The commonsense distinction between knowledge by acquaintance as distinct from knowledge by representation, while never a major theme of reflection in Western philosophy, has nevertheless received some explicit treatments over the last century. Not all of these treatments agree. I have in mind accounts by Bertrand Russell and William James. Though not in these precise terms, Edmund Husserl and subsequent philosophers of the phenomenological and existential-phenomenological traditions have devoted a good deal of effort to explain and account for the difference in kind of knowledge indicated by the commonsense distinction. Indeed, a case could be made that the effort of the phenomenological movement to ground all evidence in phenomenological description that a reader/hearer can in principle verify for herself represents a similar shift in priority of emphasis from explicit, representative knowledge to tacit, acquaintance knowledge. (This understanding of the phenomenological tradition continues unfortunately to be completely absent from standard textbooks in epistemology, which for the most part appear to reflect an Anglo-American Analytic bias against taking seriously the contributions of Continental Philosophy.) Russell's account,¹⁶ while perhaps best known among these three in the Analytic tradition of 20th century philosophy, is unfortunately constrained by Russell's assumption of the representational, "sense-data" theory of perception. While he does claim that "All our knowledge . . . rests upon acquaintance as its foundation," where "we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths,"¹⁷ the unfortunate result is that the only things with which Russell will admit that we have any acquaintance are what is privately internal to the mind – his chief example being sense-data.

Outside of these few explicit treatments, knowledge by acquaintance rarely comes up for explicit discussion as such in Western philosophy – again, particularly in textbooks emphasizing epistemology. The emphasis is plainly upon representational or propositional knowledge. As previously mentioned, Polanyi explains that it is quite natural that this should be so: we can reflect critically only upon something we can render explicit and philosophy is paradigmatically critical reflection. Tacit knowledge can become subject to critical reflection only insofar as it can in some measure be rendered explicit and represented. (I leave out of account, for the moment, consideration of the irreducible tacit component of any explicit account of tacit knowledge.) But once something essentially tacit is rendered explicit, as Polanyi takes great pains to point out, it is no longer the same knowledge and doesn't come close to reflecting all that the tacit knowledge was (or is). It is so very easy to forget and overlook this difference, and to forget how much is left out of the explicit surrogate. Thus, while our power of articulation is a great boon in serving to make possible critical reflection, it is also and

simultaneously a liability. It should be no surprise, then, that the history of philosophical reflection on the nature of human knowledge should not only concentrate almost exclusively upon explicit, representational knowledge, but also fail to take fully into account the distinctive character and structure of tacit knowledge by acquaintance.

Nevertheless, when read with care, discussions of the nature and kinds of knowledge from Plato forward often disclose recognition of direct awareness or experiential encounter with reality (i.e., recognition of knowing by acquaintance) as a crucial element in knowing, alongside, prior to, and/or beyond explicit, propositional knowledge. When speaking of intuitive, if not mystical, insight into the highest forms, including Beauty itself and the Idea of the Good, Plato speaks of such an encounter as an experiential knowing beyond precise articulation. His Allegory of the Cave underscores this experiential knowing by way of the contrast it draws between, on the one hand, those who escape the cave and come to know the forms directly for themselves and, on the other hand, the denizens of the cave whose only “knowledge” of the world outside the cave is by way of images (representations) or, worse, shadows of images – which, so far as they never exit the cave, they will never be able to verify. More concretely, Socrates’ interlocutors, when they are forced by Socrates’ questioning of their explicit accounts of piety, justice, etc., to confront and own up to their ignorance concerning these principles, are typically reduced not to utter ignorance but to a sense that they somehow and in some sense (however vague) do know (have access by acquaintance to) what they are but are unable at present to give a satisfactory explicit account of them. The theme of an ineffable, more or less mystical, experiential knowing (*apophasis* as distinct from *cataphasis*) of transcendental realities can as well be traced from Plato through Neo-Platonism to writers of the tradition of “spiritual theology” (as distinct from “scholastic theology”) in the Medieval period of philosophical theology, and on into the modern period.

In quite a different vein, with regard to an acquaintance knowledge of particular objects of the sensory realm, Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition write of our commonsense direct perceptual experience of primary substances prior to, alongside of, and undergirding our “inductive” or abstractive articulation of the universal form of these substances. Somewhat similar to this is a strand within several Christian writers (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa and, much later, Duns Scotus) that speaks of an experiential knowing of the particularity of things that transcends what can be captured in universal terms and general propositions. Even William of Ockham speaks of a direct experiential knowing of particular things in their likeness to one another, on the basis of which he contends we construct, rather than discover, our ideas of universals or general terms.

When we turn to modern philosophy in its mainstream, confidence that the mind can experientially encounter realities which transcend itself is for the most part lost through Cartesian methodological doubt. (Thomas Reid and the Scottish Commonsense School of philosophy constitute an important exception to this trend.) Nevertheless, some account is given of a direct, acquaintance form of knowledge. For Descartes, direct introspection of the mind amounts to a direct unmediated knowing by acquaintance of the immanent contents of the mind, including, above all, those clear and distinct ideas that are supposed to be wholly present to critical reflection.¹⁸ So also, for Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant, *impressions*, whether “of sense” or “of reflection” (to use Hume’s terminology), are viewed as things (internal to the mind) with which we are immediately acquainted. Consequently, although there is in this mainstream of modern Western philosophy virtually no acknowledgement of the possibility of being directly acquainted with substantial realities transcending the mind, there is retained some sense of knowledge by acquaintance.

The principal point of this quick survey of reference to acquaintance knowledge, as distinct from representative knowledge, in the history of Western philosophy is simply to point out that it has not gone

altogether unacknowledged, though it clearly has not been given its full due. Mainstream modern philosophy, though, by skeptically calling into question the possibility of direct acquaintance with realities transcending the mind, in effect requires that all knowledge of such realities be indirect and thus explicit, attained at best via inference from things present to the mind's acquaintance that represent them. Accordingly, explicit propositional knowledge with regard to such realities (built up on such a basis) has to be the sole sort of knowledge we can have of them at all – at least as far as mainstream modern philosophy is concerned.

Implications for Understanding Perception

Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing conceived as knowing by acquaintance renders intelligible and justifies a basically commonsense understanding of perception – in contrast to the still dominant modern theory of perception, the representational theory.¹⁸ The representational theory construes sense perception as involving an inference based on the mediation of sense impressions (or, on some recent accountings, on the basis of electro-chemical events in the brain). The perceiver (either as perceiving mind or as brain) has immediate access (direct acquaintance, direct relationship) solely with these impressions (or events), which may or may not correspond to (may or may not accurately represent) the objects in the world that causally give rise to them. On this theory, sensory appearance (sense data, or sense-data-as-worked-up-into-some-coherent-pattern) is distinct from the object perceived, a separate, mediating representation. On the contrary, sense perception on Polanyi's account is *a from-to tacit stretch of attentive consciousness* (by no means an explicit inference¹⁹), which attends from subsidiary particulars within one's body (as clues) to their joint meaning, which meaning is a discernment or awareness of the thing being perceived. Sense perception is thereby conceived as *contact with the perceived*, a relation of greater or lesser rapport with the object, a direct acquaintance with it – though, to be sure, perspectival, aspectual, and fallible. It is not itself a discrete event inside an inaccessibly private mind, nor is it (or the perceiver) located in some particular region of the brain (however much the brain is involved subsidiarily). Sensory appearance is a genuine appearance of the object, not separate from or additional to it but *a co-relation of a perceiver to it and it to a perceiver*. It is an access to the object that is finite, limited, and to some extent colored and shaped by (1) the perceiver's perceptual placement and orientation with respect the object, (2) the perceptual capacity of the perceiver, (3) the acuity of the perceiver's sense organ(s), (4) the attention of the perceiver, etc. But on Polanyi's account, the perceiver is not on the hither end of a causal chain of events stretching from the object to her brain, trying to imagine and infer what must have produced these effects. Rather, the perceiver goes right up to the object perceived, touching it, exploring it, examining it, indwelling it. The perceiving person is not inaccessibly inside the head (or brain) of her body. She is fully incarnate, a living mindbody.²⁰ She is not only at the surface of her body touching the object, but reaching out beyond her body's surface, encountering the object and relating to it for what it is. Thus she is not merely her living body but more: she is a stretched web of attention from within her body in its situation in the world to the perceived object in *its* context, open to a horizon of further perceptual exploration and deepening acquaintance. Perception, thus conceived, is not passive (as the classical British Empiricists conceived it, following Descartes, and the Logical Positivists in our own day) but active and relational, a connection with the enviroing world; it is a mode of our being in the world. Perceptual knowing is a knowing by acquaintance. It is our most fundamental way of knowing the world and knowing our way about within it.

I do not wish to give the impression that Polanyi was the first to mount serious criticisms of the representative theory of perception. Thomas Reid's criticisms of it in the 18th Century were actually quite similar to Polanyi's.²¹ Yet those criticisms did little to dislodge its dominance from the mainstream of Western epistemology. So also, Continental Phenomenology in the 20th Century from quite a different angle has

developed serious criticisms of the theory, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of perception²² being perhaps the closest among phenomenologists to Polanyi's own account. I only wish to bring out another of the more prominent epistemological implications of Polanyi's account that are highlighted by thinking of tacit knowing as acquaintance knowledge.

Implications for the Knowability of the Knower / The Being of the Knower / The Embodied Subject

Tacit knowing conceived as knowing by acquaintance recovers and brings to light the situated, incarnate bodily *being* of the knower in the world, in relational rapport with what is known within its context. Conceiving the situation of the knower post-critically and committally, as opposed to conceiving it critically in skeptical detachment, there is no basis for radically questioning whether what is supposedly known is real or whether the supposed knowledge could possibly be knowledge. Moreover, the knower is importantly incarnate, in the world, and not in some discarnate, worldless subjectivity. The knower is bodily located, as commonsense recognizes, with a particular personal, historical, and cultural background. This is something we can commonsensically take in and become acquainted with for ourselves empathetically, from our own incarnate perspective. That is to say, the fact of her knowing, the achievement of her knowing, is an event and a condition that takes place in the world and not outside it. It is a concrete relationship between her and what is known, that in turn can be recognized and known by the rest of us. Accordingly, her acquaintance with the known we can come clearly to know as being from a certain angle and mode of approach, which will in turn be reflected in her articulation of what she has thus come to know. Her acquaintance as well as her articulate knowledge is thus inevitably partial, finite, and fallible, *and knowable as such*.

When we consider knowledge primarily as knowledge by representation (or as knowledge by description, to use Russell's phrase), it is easy to lose sight of this concrete relationship of rapport between the knower and the known. And when that relationship is lost sight of, we become in imagination, if not for real, *as if* we were discarnate knowers, or at least as if our knowledge was discarnate – floating around in disembodied Cartesian minds, books, and electronic storage devices. Karl Popper seemed to think of knowledge in this way in speaking of our building up “knowledge without a knowing subject.” But none of that “information” makes meaningful sense except as it is understood, interpreted, and upheld tacitly by persons in incarnate relationships of acquaintance with things (in addition to their comprehending relationships of acquaintance with the information in question).

Implications for Interpersonal Knowing and a Renewed Conception of Objectivity

Tacit knowing conceived as knowing by acquaintance recovers and brings to light not only the situated, incarnate bodily *being* of the knower as knowable, but also the interrelationship of knowers to one another. Our incarnate knowing by acquaintance is always alongside other knowers, bringing to each other's attention and mutual acknowledgement aspects of the world that others among us have not yet noticed. It is here that the perspectival nature of our knowing most clearly comes to light, with each of us ranged around what together we are contemplating, but each from a different angle and possibly from a different frame of reference.

The really significant thing to notice about this is how each of us are able to recognize this situation, how we each can see each other seeing the same thing from different angles (and occasionally discovering that what we thought was the same thing turns out to have been something quite different in each case). We thus make

sense in common, not despite our uniquely distinct perspectives onto the object before us *but precisely in virtue of our different perspectives*. The object in its objective reality is to be discovered at the intersection of our perspectives – so far as we are open and committed to discovering it. In this mutual recognition we recognize that which transcends our perspective onto the world; we glimpse the object-in-itself-for-us and not just the object-for-me. We thereby transcend our subjectivity and come to attain objectivity (in the sense of apprehending what is objectively true and real) through responsible interpersonal judgment – a knowledge of a reality that manifests itself inexhaustibly to the indefinite multiplicity of competent perspectives brought to bear upon it. Not attainment once for all, to be sure, but attainment nevertheless. This mutual recognition of things in common, there, beyond what any one of us can succeed in exhaustively representing, is the heart of what true objectivity and its attainment is all about. We lose sight of it, though, when our concern for ‘objectivity’ is focused instead simply upon competing explicit renderings of what is the case abstracted from the perspectival relationships to reality that tacitly they express and from a taken for granted perspective of non-committal critical reflection. Then the goal of ‘objectivity’ becomes less a matter of connecting with reality out there, transcending any one perspective, than with attaining an explicit account whose form least reflects a limited, personal perspective. A fuller sorting out of these different notions of objectivity will have to be dealt with in another place.²³

Implications for “Mediated” Acquaintance Knowing

So much for perceptual acquaintance knowing. But will this do? What about recognition and identification of what it is we perceive? What about the identity, nature, and form of what it is we perceive? Don’t these presuppose a system of universals, categories, and forms by means of which we differentiate one thing from another and conceptually relate them to each other? What about the role of language and culture, which as human beings, qualifies our perception *as the perception of human beings who possess the power of naming*, as opposed to the perception of animals without language? Doesn’t language make a difference here, a *mediated* difference, such that we don’t perceive directly or immediately, as perhaps animals do, but always as filtered through language and culture? And given language in this capacity, shouldn’t that immediately make perception propositional and representational? Surely this is part of what Kant was getting at in distinguishing the world-as-experienced-and-understood-by-us (*phenomena*) from the world-in-itself apart from its construal in our experience and understanding (*noumena*). Accordingly, surely we can’t be said to know (be acquainted with) things in themselves, but only what we have construed and constructed them to be via the mediation of the categories and principles with which we apprehend them.

Consequently, the idea that we human beings, language animals that we are, can somehow have a direct relational acquaintance with realities – i.e., things in themselves in their transcendence beyond any particular representation of them – seems naïve, to say the least.

I won’t pretend that these questions can be easily answered; nor will I dismiss them. However, I believe they can be answered in a manner consistent with what I have said so far and I am convinced Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing provides a way to answer them. However, here and now I can do little more than offer a few remarks suggesting how I believe they can be answered.

Polanyi distinguishes between the meaning of something when attended to focally and the meaning of that same thing when attended from subsidiarily. The meaning it has (in the latter case) is ordinarily displaced to the distal focus of our attention, to which we are attending by subsidiarily and proximally relying on that thing

as a clue to that focus. That meaning, its meaning as a clue to that focus, is lost (temporarily at least) as we switch our attention to that thing in a focal way. Phenomenally there is a difference in each of these cases: attending to it focally we see the thing itself (not as a clue to something else); it doesn't mean anything other than itself. It is opaque. Attending from it subsidiarily, our attention focuses on its (now different) meaning, which is in certain respects displaced from the thing itself. In this case, it (the thing we are attending from) is transparent. In the case of a probe we are skillfully using to explore a cavity, the probe and its impact upon our hand and fingers are transparent to their meaning, which is the disclosure of the features of the cavity being explored by its use. There is no inference going on here from the one to the other, Polanyi insists; we are not at a distance from the cavity being probed trying to guess or speculate what the cavity must be like from the impact of the probe on our hand. Rather, we have incorporated the probe into our embodied being and are there at the tip of the probe, inside the cavity; the probe has become an extension of our perceiving fingers, an extension of our embodied self. In that case, we know the probe not focally as an object unto itself, but subsidiarily as an extension of our knowing subject-self; the probe (competently employed) is no less transparent and no more opaque to the cavity being explored than is our arm, hand, and fingers

In this case it is in an important respect misleading to speak of our knowing of the cavity as *mediated* by the probe (or by the impact of the probe upon our hand and fingers) in the sense that there is something (a mediating *object*) coming between us and the cavity, separating us from it. So also, on Polanyi's account, anything serving in the same capacity as a probe, extending the reach of our body's perceptual acquaintance, should not be conceived to *mediate* that acquaintance – at least not in the sense that we would be directly acquainted only with the “mediating” probe and not the thing itself. Alternatively, should one nevertheless call this sort of thing mediation, it is essential to distinguish it from the sense of mediation that involves some object coming between and separating us from the reality in question. The crucial question is where the “touching” surface of the knowing self lies: on the near or the far end of the ‘mediating’ probe in question. My contention, with Polanyi, is that it is on the far or distal end.

Polanyi often speaks of scientific instruments, articulate conceptual frameworks, sometimes even scientific theories, functioning like probes,²⁴ extending our perceptual acquaintance into such matters as subatomic matter and interstellar space – indeed, back into the first microseconds of the Big Bang. When attended to more or less focally by one who comprehends it, a scientific theory (e.g., the Schroedinger wave equations of quantum mechanics) functions representatively: in this case, the theory *represents* the probability distribution of the subatomic particles we are using it to describe. In that respect it can be said to mediate our ‘encounter’ with the particles in question (strictly speaking, it mediates the expert knowledge of subatomic physicists to us). It comes between us and the particles, representing them. It is present, not they. In that case we are present to it, not we to them. However and to the contrary, according to Polanyi, when skillfully attended from subsidiarily by subatomic physicists (within the context of the rest of the articulate theoretical framework of subatomic physics), the Schroedinger equations function not representatively but, rather, “presentatively” or relationally: they become an interiorized part of the physicist's knowing body, extending the reach of his perceptual acquaintance into the quantum realm of subatomic phenomena. They take him into the presence of those realities and potentially afford him access to aspects of those phenomena hitherto unarticulated. If he has the creative intuition of a great physicist, he will find there, by his own “bodily feel” of the territory intimated by the equations, clues to an extension, emendation, modification of, or even a superior replacement to, the existing map of these equations.

Now does the physicist in this instance connect with realities in this case or only with constructions or

theoretical construals of evidence? Conceived non-committally, it will inevitably seem to be the latter. But conceived committally by someone competent enough to know something about quantum physics, the physicist connects with realities. This is part of what Polanyi means in speaking of reality as something one can only speak of committally;²⁵ it is inapprehensible apart from reaching out to connect with it. Methodological faith in this respect is an essential aspect of having eyes to see and ears to hear it with.

My point is that here, and elsewhere, our existing conceptual and cultural maps – indeed, names, words, and statements generally by means of which we identify things as the sort of things they are – function in a variety of ways, depending on how we relate ourselves to them. They can and do limit, bias, and constrain our awareness of the territory they purportedly represent, just as size, stiffness, and shape of a surgeon’s probe limits what he is aware of through its use as a probe – *but not inveterately so*, for they and it also enable awareness no less than they and it limit awareness; they give access at the same time that they constrain access. Indeed, we become aware of their specific limits, bias, and/or constraints precisely when we attend to the territory in question from the perspective of other conceptual and cultural maps which lack those specific limitations. These limitations seem especially problematic when our attention is fixed in a critical, non-committal way more on the map than on the territory, attending *to* the map focally, more than *from* it subsidiarily – for in that way we are insensible to the respect in which territory (or reality) transcends any one map (indeed, all of the maps we have). This again is due to the difference between considering it critically rather than *post-critically*, skeptically (toward our personal access to the territory in question) rather than in methodological faith. When we are primarily attending to it focally, the map can truly be said to mediate our knowledge of the territory, coming between us and it; if the map is accurate, we know the territory by representation. If that were the whole picture, our knowledge of the territory would be limited to what we would be able explicitly to infer from the map. A great deal depends, then, on whether our attention is fixed focally on the map or attends subsidiarily from the map to the territory the map is intended to represent. In the latter case, and specifically if our attention is on the lookout for aspects of the territory that are under-represented, are not well represented, or are not represented at all by the current map, the map does not function as a map *but as a mental probe for our acquaintance with the territory*. In that case, it enables us to become present to the territory and in position for creative articulation of new aspects of the territory beyond the current map. Indeed, it is precisely this extended bodily acquaintance with territory that gives rise to the creative articulation of new discoveries and new maps. To the person who competently interiorizes and indwells them with an eye to deepening acquaintance with territory, our best maps are not (or are not simply) mental constructions standing between us and the objective reality they purport to represent. Indeed, *in this connection* they are not, and do not function as, knowledge by representation. They are not representations of what is absent but rather pointers or clues that enable us to become present to territory. They are extensions and enablers of our acquaintance with that reality. To be sure, they don’t give us the whole of that reality, nor do they give us that reality in a wholly unadulterated way, but they do connect us with it sufficiently to enable us to begin to glimpse the territory itself beyond the map. That is precisely what Polanyi had in mind when speaking of our *making contact with reality* as involving an anticipation or foreknowing of the capacity of reality to reveal itself in novel ways in the future. In any case, thus taken up and integrated as an extension of our acquaintance knowing, our maps cease to function in the way they do when considered focally; they are then no longer representative knowledge (at least not until we switch our focal attention back to them). This essentially makes acquaintance knowledge (extended by our articulate frameworks) the primary form of human knowledge, despite articulate frameworks being involved, and explicit or representative knowledge derivative from and dependent upon it.

Consider this example. When teaching philosophy as I regularly do, my primary aim is not to teach

what Plato wrote or what Aristotle wrote as specific, explicit content to be mastered (although that, to be sure, is a subordinate aim). My primary aim is rather to help my students come to a place where they develop a sense for themselves of what Plato and Aristotle were respectively getting at, the territory they were each seeking to bring to light and comprehend. The primary focus is not on the respective maps (i.e., theories) of Plato and Aristotle nor the arguments with which they sought to justify these maps. Instead the focus is on the territory their maps sought to articulate and represent, each from the angle of the philosopher's own articulate framework. Only an acquaintance for themselves with that territory pointed out by their maps will put my students in a position to appreciate critically Plato's and Aristotle's maps for the great yet limited achievements that they are.²⁶ (As mentioned above, developing an acquaintance for oneself with the territory beyond Plato's own account is the principal point of escaping the cave in Plato's famous allegory. Anything less is to be left with mere shadows and images of reality in the cave, even if those shadows and images be Plato's ideas.)

Concluding Remarks

My aim in this paper has been to explain how tacit knowing as cognitive contact with reality, as brought to light by Polanyi, should be construed fundamentally as a knowing by acquaintance as distinct from knowing by representation. Many of the radical implications of Polanyi's understanding of tacit knowing, beyond being simply a dimension or coefficient of explicit representational knowledge, do not come to light until it is seen in these terms. The mainstream of Western philosophical reflection on the nature of knowledge has predominantly focused on knowledge by representation and has paid relatively little attention to knowledge by acquaintance. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization, including some within the 20th Century who have deliberately sought to challenge this focus, whose work can and should be seen in many respects as convergent with Polanyi's. Nevertheless, the predominance of that focus continues to this day, even at times among Polanyi interpreters. I hope I have contributed to rectifying this imbalance and persuaded you of the value of thinking of tacit knowing as acquaintance knowing, and that acquaintance knowing, extended by articulate culture, is the primary kind of human knowing.

Endnotes

¹ *In The Study of Man* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959), Lecture I, among other places. See also *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 264.

² This is a point sometimes lost on students of Polanyi. It is easy to confuse what is focal with what is explicit. They are not the same.

³ I identify at least ten things embraced by what Polanyi calls tacit knowledge, several of which overlap others: First of all, it refers to *everything of we know or are aware but cannot* (in a given circumstance or at a given moment) *make explicit*. Second, and more narrowly, it includes *our subsidiary awareness* of particulars on which we rely in becoming aware of and understanding something to which we are attending focally. Third, it includes *the cultural tradition(s) and articulate framework(s) that constitute our intellectual context*, to which we have acritically apprenticed ourselves in developing our articulate cognitive powers and on which we continue subsidiarily to rely to communicate and critically assess with others our findings. Fourth, it includes *the tacit bodily know-how or skills* (encompassing skills of connoisseurship and sensibility) *on which we rely* in all that we do, but especially the things we quite unselfconsciously do in connection with all of our knowing, articulating, interpreting, evaluating, explaining, etc. Fifth, it includes *the act of interpreting, comprehending, and upholding* what we explicitly take to be true. Sixth, it includes *the creative powers and heuristic passions to which we entrust ourselves* in pursuing discovery of hidden truth, articulation of obscure meanings, and solution of perplexing problems. Seventh, it includes *the anticipatory foreknowledge* that is implicit in all knowledge we have of problems, things we are trying to figure out, things we are struggling to articulate, and reality in its transcendence beyond our explicit grasp (what Polanyi calls its capacity to manifest itself inexhaustibly). Eighth, it includes *our body-*

as-indwelt, our indwelling-subject-self, which for Polanyi is not so much that from which we attend in attending to, e.g., a spectacle beyond ourselves, but is itself *the from-to stretch of our incarnate personal being*. Ninth, it includes the way we intelligently employ our articulations – *thinking from or with what has been made articulate*, as distinct from attending focally to them. Tenth, and touching on all of these, it *includes the investment of ourselves in – our becoming present to, in, and with — all that we know* (with all sorts of qualitative variations thereto) – what Polanyi calls the acritical fiduciary coefficient to all that we know. My construal of tacit knowledge as acquaintance knowledge specifically highlights the seventh through the tenth of these things embraced by tacit knowledge.

⁴ See, for example, Andy Sanders’ work, *Michael Polanyi’s Post-Critical Epistemology: A Reconstruction of Some Aspects of “Tacit Knowing”* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988).

⁵ One important exception to this generalization is the work of Esther L. Meek, *Contact with Reality: An Examination of Realism in the Work of Michael Polanyi*, Temple University Ph.D. Dissertation, 1983 (Universities Microfilm International, Ann Arbor, MI, 1985, 85-09387)..

⁶ Take note of my phrasing here: I am not saying that *all* aspects of tacit knowing should be construed as knowing by acquaintance, but that the specific respects in which Polanyi speaks of it as cognitive contact with reality should be so construed.

⁷ I have just recently come across what promises to be a profoundly important convergence between what I interpret Polanyi to be about in this respect and a new development in feminist epistemology, distinguishing in “women’s ways of knowing” a predominance of “connected knowing” as distinct from “separate knowing” which predominates in “men’s ways of knowing,” at least in our culture. For perhaps the best recent explication of this distinction see Blythe McVicker Clinchy, “Connected and Separate Knowing: Toward a Marriage of Two Minds,” *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by “Women’s Ways of Knowing”*, edited by Nancy Rule Goldberger, et al. (New York: Basic Books, 1996), pp. 205-247. Although in this essay Clinchy makes no reference to Polanyi’s work, she draws strongly on the work of Peter Elbow, especially his account of “the doubting game” and “the believing game,” in his collection, *Embracing Contraries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), who makes considerable use of Polanyi’s thinking. For an extension of Polanyi’s thinking similar to Elbow’s, but speaking of “the rhetoric of assent” rather than of “the believing game,” see Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

⁸ See Polanyi’s careful differentiation of *a-critical* from both *critical* and *uncritical* in *Personal Knowledge*, p. 264 and following.

⁹ See *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 264-268.

¹⁰ I wish to acknowledge here my indebtedness to a discussion of these matters by William James. See, in particular, his well known essay, “The Will to Believe,” widely anthologized – e.g., in *Essays in Pragmatism*, edited by Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner, 1952), 88-109. In many respects, but by no means all, James’ thinking converges with Polanyi’s.

¹¹ See what Polanyi says about “universal intent” as distinct from universality in *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 78, and then *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 300-303.

¹² See *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 303-306.

¹³ On this conception of commonsense, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1958), ch. 39.

¹⁴ Polanyi uses the metaphor of map and territory in Lecture I of *The Study of Man*.

¹⁵ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, p. 68.

¹⁶ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959, 1912), ch. V: “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description.”

¹⁷ Russell, pp. 46 and 48.

¹⁸ Postscript: Mention should be made here as well of modern rationalists’ appeal to intuition of the self-evidence of first principles as a special sort of experiential knowledge by acquaintance.

¹⁹ I acknowledge here that it is not the only current theory of perception, only that it is still the dominant one.

²⁰ See, for example, *The Tacit Dimension*, p. 32.

²¹ “Mindbody” is a neologism first used, so far as I am aware, by William H. Poteat, as a result of long apprenticeship to Polanyi’s way of conceiving things. See Poteat’s *Polyanian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*, (Durham, NY: Duke University Press, 1985) and *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection*

(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); see references to “mindbody” in index of each book.

²² See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,” trans. James M. Edie, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

²⁴ One place where I have tried to do so is my article, “The ‘Primitive’ / ‘Civilized’ Opposition and the Modern Notion of Objectivity: A Linkage,” *PRE/TEXT: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal of Rhetoric* 2:1-2 [volume devoted to articles on Michael Polanyi] (1981), 151-171.

²⁵ See *Personal Knowledge*, ch. 4.7 “Tools and Frameworks” *et passim*, and ch. 5: “Articulation.,” *The Study of Man*, pp. 29-32; *The Tacit Dimension*, pp. 15-24; and “Knowing and Being,” in *Knowing and Being*, edited by Marjorie Grene (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 123-137.

²⁶ See *Personal Knowledge*, p. 303: “I can speak of facts, knowledge, proof, reality, etc., within my commitment situation, for it is constituted by my search for facts, knowledge, proof, reality, etc., as binding on me. These are proper designations for commitment targets which apply so long as I am committed to them; but they cannot be referred to non-committally. You cannot speak without self-contradiction of knowledge you do not believe, or of a reality which does not exist.”

²⁷ Examined with care, Plato’s dialogues reveal themselves to be delicately crafted to bring about this result, rather than to persuade his readers simply to embrace his so-called philosophical doctrines.

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. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. MLA or APA style are preferred; because the journal serves English writers across the world, we do not require anybody's “standard English.” 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. Consistency and clear writing are expected.

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