

***Relating Polanyi's Tacit Dimension to Social Epistemology: A Response to Walter Gulick***

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Walter Gulick reviews three recent books, Harry Collins' *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge* (2010), Neil Gascoigne and Tim Thornton's *Tacit Knowledge* (2013) and Stephen Turner's *Understanding the Tacit* (2014). He reports that Turner is "harshly critical" of Collins (2015, 21) and that Turner regards Gascoigne and Thornton's approach as "too restricted to be of much help in understanding the tacit" (2015, 22). He praises Turner's book as being "the closest in spirit to Polanyi's exploration of the tacit dimension" (2015, 23), and says that Turner's naturalistic approach to the tacit "is the most promising avenue of development" (2015, 26). Gulick's hope "is to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive theory of the tacit, a theory that illuminates both the individual and social dimensions of tacit knowing" (2015, 2). In agreement with Gulick, I find better materials for such a groundwork in the texts of Polanyi and Turner than I do in those of Collins or Gascoigne and Thornton.

**Two Fault Lines**

After my first reading of the following sentence in Gulick's conclusion, however, I strongly disagreed with it. "It seems best," he says (2015, 23), "not to view the three books as incommensurate takes on the same topic, but as interpretations of different aspects of a very complex subject." After reflecting more carefully on Gulick's use of "incommensurate," I have come to agree with the first half of the sentence. The books are not incommensurate because each of their writers has the necessary background to be able to understand the arguments of the others. But I still disagree with the second half of the sentence. Rather than viewing the books as potentially complementary interpretations of different aspects of the tacit, I see them as providing contradictory answers to some of the same questions. The ground on which the writers stand is common enough for them to understand one another, and it is this understanding that makes it possible for them to disagree so deeply. I imagine the ground on which they stand as a battleground, divided into three hostile camps by two fault lines. One divides Gascoigne and Thornton from Turner and Collins, and the other comes between Turner and Collins.

Turner and Collins have deep disagreements, but both their approaches are more naturalistic than Gascoigne and Thornton's analytic approach.. In "Tacit knowledge meets analytic Kantianism," Turner says that Gascoigne and Thornton try to keep their philosophical approach "pure" by excluding considerations of the findings of the natural and social sciences. He (2014-2015, 44) concludes,

To restrict one's notion of knowledge to justified true belief and then extend it to the tacit ... manages to miss all of the interesting problems with the tacit -- the idea of embodied cognition, the idea of extended minds, and much more. For most of us who are philosophers of science, what we care about are real cases in science, as Polanyi did, cases in which the claims of science are fallible, dependent on a complex supportive social world and traditions. As I noted in the opening

paragraph, this “explanatory” approach diverges radically from Gascoigne and Thornton’s. So does the notion of knowledge with which it is associated.

Turner affirms, but Gascoigne and Thornton deny, that it is *useful* for philosophers to incorporate the findings of the various sciences into their philosophical reflections. Gascoigne and Thornton affirm, but Turner denies, that knowledge is justified true belief.

The other fault line divides what Turner calls “social” from the “collective” picture painted by Collins. Collins affirms, but Turner denies, that collectivities can be knowing subjects. Collins is explicit about being a follower of Émile Durkheim, connecting his notion of collective tacit knowledge to Durkheim’s notion of collective consciousness. Turner traces this fault line back to an argument between Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It continues to divide thinkers and writers to this day (Turner 2014, 189-191). This is familiar territory for Turner, who has argued against the existence of collective mental objects in a series of books (1994; 2002; 2010).

Gulick (2015, 19) compares Turner to a goalie on a hockey team, “protecting the net of truth in social theory from theoretical shots that don’t deserve to score.” I think Gulick’s image fits the authors of all three books. Each protects his version of the net of truth from shots taken from the hostile positions. Collins (2011-2012, 39) uses the language of naval warfare in defending his position,

I will nail my colours to the mast of my three-way classification of tacit knowledge and am ready to go down with the ship. The three-way classification is ‘Relational Tacit Knowledge’ (RTK); ‘Somatic Tacit Knowledge’ (STK); and ‘Collective Tacit Knowledge’ (CTK).

Collins puts collective tacit knowledge at the heart of his notion of “the nature of society” (2010, x). He attributes opposition to his position to individualistic bias. He says that collective consciousness “has been a fundamental notion in sociology at least since Durkheim but the bias toward individualism today is so strong in most academic communities that it is hard to posit a collective location for anything” (2010, 131).

Turner and Collins each claim that the position he defends is a minority position in sociology and social theory. In *Brains/Practices/Relativism, Social Theory after Cognitive Science*, Turner (2002, 1) says, “The individualizing character of learning histories is a brute fact about brains that agrees with a minority tradition in social theory, and conflicts – or so I shall argue – with the dominant one.” The tradition Turner regards as still dominant in social theory is the one that Collins describes as having been smothered by “the bias toward individualism.”

Gulick (2015, 20) correctly points out that Turner does not find transcendental arguments for shared mental stuff convincing. Turner points to the neo-Kantian character of transcendental arguments,

People do something, such as communicate; they could not communicate

unless they shared the same framework; therefore they share the same framework. This argument, which shows its neo-Kantian origins, mimics a standard strategy used by Polanyi and many others to argue that explicit rules are never sufficient and need to be supplemented by something tacit. But the argument that something extra (and tacit) is needed to explain, for example, communication or scientific discovery, is not the same as the argument for a shared framework or for the possession of the same practices. The argument for “sharing” or sameness requires us to believe that there is some mechanism by which the same rules, presuppositions, or practices get into the heads of different people (Turner 2014, 69).

Whether or not a social theorist or philosopher will take a position closer to Turner’s than to Collins’s or Gascoigne and Thornton’s is likely to depend, at least in part, on whether or not she is persuaded by the kind of transcendental argument Turner describes. He contends that the persuasive force of most transcendental arguments depend upon their ruling out any alternative explanations. He holds that there is a much better alternative explanation than the appeal to shared tacit frameworks.

### **Turner’s Alternative Explanations**

I mention two aspects of Turner’s alternative to shared tacit frameworks, social behaviorism and mirror neurons. Both of these emphasize the covert residues, or tacit memories, of environmental feedbacks to an active person.

“Social behaviorism” is the term George Herbert Mead used to describe the kind of theory that later came to be called “symbolic interactionism.” Mead agreed with the behaviorists of the early twentieth century that environmental conditioning is an important part of individual learning. He called his version of behaviorism “social” to distinguish it from the “radical behaviorism” of those who tried to eliminate all “mentalist” language from their explanations of learning. Turner uses “habituation” to point to the process by which environmental feedback shapes the behavior, verbal as well as non-verbal, of a developing child. These feedbacks, “reinforcements” in standard behaviorist language, result in the child’s learning to conform to acceptable ways of speaking and acting. Turner (2014, 10) says:

The fact that tacit learning requires feedback makes it radically different from explicit learning. But in actual cases the two are mixed together. One learns a language of appraisal together with learning how to do things, for example. Each kind of learning has its own tacit component, because it has feedback that is not explicitly constructed, as an experiment or test of a hypothesis would be.

Gulick (2015, 25) quotes Eric Kandel’s (2006, 132) use of “habituation” in connection with his description of implicit memory, “habituation, sensitization, and classical conditioning, as well as perceptual and motor skills such as riding a bicycle or serving a tennis ball.” In Polanyi’s language, our memories of the results of these kinds of processes are not, for the most part, objects of focal awareness. They are subsidiaries

*from* which we attend to focal objects.

Mirror neurons constitute another part of Turner's alternative to shared tacit frameworks. He asks (2014, 163), "What sorts of mental things are needed to account for interaction?" He argues that the interacting persons do not need shared mental things – frameworks, concepts, rules, etc. These do not add anything that cannot be explained by "mirror neurons plus our capacity to invent functional substitutes in speech." He reflects on the profound difference between saying that mirror neurons are "shared" by the perceptual and motor systems of an individual, and saying that such things as tacit frameworks, tacit concepts, and tacit rules are "shared" by different persons. Turner does not deny the universality of the structure of the human brain, but insists on maintaining the distinction between this phylogenetically given structure and all that is learned (2015, 112-113).

This is one of the areas in which Turner's openness to the findings of science is important. A refrain that runs through the books he has written over the last two decades is the finding of neuroscience that learning histories result in progressively greater individual differences in the acquired patterns of synaptic connections in human brains. The importance of adding the work of mirror neurons to social behaviorism is that they explain how humans learn by "imitation" as well as by environmental "conditioning." When two persons interact, each "takes the role of the other," to use the language of Mead. This is not a magical or telepathic "sharing" of identical concepts, but a process in which both parties attempt to guess at what the other is thinking and feeling. Clues are provided both by reciprocal feedback and by the functioning of both persons' mirror neurons.

Instead of trying to summarize Turner's more detailed descriptions of how mirror neurons work both in the development of infants and the interactions of adults, I will conclude by connecting his account of what is necessary to social interaction with Polanyi's (1969, 181-207) essay "Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading." He illustrates sense-giving by having readers imagine a traveller's letter to a friend. Earlier in the day, he had seen distant "trees, fields, rivers and peaks," and heard "church-bells ringing" and also had seen "villagers walking to attend service." Later, when writing his letter, he is no longer actually seeing and hearing these things, but drawing upon his memories of those experiences. *From* those memories, he gives sense *to* the words he writes. When the friend reads those words, she reads sense *into* them, not by drawing upon the writer's memories, but by drawing upon her own. *From* her memories, she attributes sense *to* the words she reads.

In telling this story, Polanyi neither says nor implies that the writer and reader "share" the same mental things. There is no magical transmission of the writer's memories into the mind of the reader. The words of the letter are identical for both the writer and the reader, but the focal meanings they attribute to those words are not identical, because the subsidiaries from which the writer attributed meanings to his words are not the same as the subsidiaries from which the reader attributes meaning to them. In the language of John Searle (2010, 31-32), the writer and the reader attribute meanings to the same words from distinctly different "Networks" and "Backgrounds."

## **Turner on Taylor’s “Frameworks”**

The exception to Gulick’s general agreement with Turner is his saying that Turner’s criticisms of Charles Taylor “seem to miss the mark” (2015, 21). Turner’s criticisms are in his introductory chapter, where he illustrates one of his prescriptions for an adequate account of the tacit: “Recognize metaphors as metaphors and analogies as analogies. Metaphorical usages, such as ‘frameworks,’ abound in this literature, usually without any sense that they need to be cashed in” (2014, 3). Turner (2014, 6-8) criticizes Taylor for using “framework” without explicitly recognizing that it is a metaphor, for treating frameworks as mental objects that are shared by people living in the same territories or during the same historical period, and for claiming that he (Taylor) can “read off” the contents of these tacit objects. Gulick does not address Turner’s claim that Taylor’s use of “framework” is metaphorical, but says that Taylor does not use “framework” to point to a “sort of Durkheimian collective form of the tacit.” He adds that Turner’s criticism of Taylor’s use of “framework” to explain how collectivities have the same beliefs and values misses the target, because Taylor uses “framework” to describe, rather than explain. I am not sure about the extent to which Taylor’s use of “framework” points Durkheimian collective object, but I do agree with Turner that Taylor uses “framework” metaphorically without explicitly recognizing it as such.

## **Conclusion**

The fault lines that divide these three books from one another are similar to divisions within social epistemology. The analytic vs. naturalistic division is similar to the division between analytic and political social epistemology, and the division between the social and collective is similar to the division between those who do and do not treat communities as epistemic agents. The arguments of Polanyi, Turner and Gulick are much more likely to persuade the social epistemologists who align with the political, rather than analytical approach, and those who agree with Heidi Grasswick (2011) that individuals-in-community, rather than communities as collectivities, are the true epistemic agents.

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