

On Moodey's Response with Additional Comments toward Understanding the Tacit
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It is always pleasant to receive a thoughtful response to one's article, and Richard Moodey's comments are constructively reflective. As a matter of full disclosure, it should be noted that Moodey and I have for some years exchanged thoughts and reactions to our mutual benefit. He is clear in how he differs with one and why, but his criticisms are offered with modesty and in a way that invites open dialogue. To use one of Michael Polanyi's trademark phrases, discourse with Moodey is *convivial*.

One and the Same Tacit?

The chief objection Moodey has concerning my article "Relating Polanyi's Tacit Dimension to Social Epistemology: Three Recent Interpretations" seems to center about my claim that Collins, Turner, and Gascoigne and Thornton (G&T) offer "interpretations of different aspects of a very complex subject."¹ Moodey sees the authors of the three books in question as "providing contradictory answers to some of the same questions."²

It is difficult to respond precisely to this claim by Moodey because he does not specify what those same questions are. To be sure, there are at least two overarching questions that all three books address: What are the tacit phenomena to be interpreted? Secondly, how are tacit phenomena related to the human processes of knowing?

What complicates matters, in my view, is that what is even meant by "tacit phenomena" gets understood in different ways consistent with an author's disciplinary specialty and approach to the tacit within that specialty. These specialties are, in Collins's case, sociology; in the case of G&T, analytic philosophy; and in the case of Turner, philosophy of the social sciences. So, to begin with, it is fair to ask how likely it is that a sociologist, a pair of analytic philosophers, and a philosopher of the social sciences will ask the same questions about a complex subject matter. Even more crucial, though, is discerning whether each of the authors has the same subject matter in mind when dealing with tacit phenomena. Also significant is determining what it is about the tacit dimension that intrigues the authors, and what sort of outcome each hopes to achieve.

The journal *Philosophia Scientiae* devoted an issue in 2013³ to a critical examination of Collins's work, especially as developed in his *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge*. Among those contributing essays were Turner and Thornton. The exchanges between Turner and Collins are especially illuminating with respect to the issues of how the tacit is understood and what is sought from the study of the tacit. Collins notes that

there is a deep difference in my approach and Turner's approach to scientific explanation. I think this might reflect something different about our starting points (we have both *ended* by doing philosophy, or quasi-

¹ Gulick 2015, 23.

² Gulick 2016, 1.

³ Volume 17:3.

philosophy). My starting point is in fieldwork and practical problems whereas his starting point, as his critique exemplifies, is the philosophical canon ... Turner and I just want different things from our explanations. What I value most is something that makes it easy for me to understand what I see going on around me while what Turner values most is something that does not introduce any unnecessary explanatory apparatus where it can be avoided. Indeed, Turner's desire in respect of this is so strong that he not only eschew collectivities, he eschews the whole idea of tacit knowledge, wanting to replace it with habits (see, e.g., [Turner 1994]).⁴

What Collins sees going on around him is the impossibility of computer programs to deal adequately (explicitly) with protean social notions of what is appropriate to say and do in different contexts. As one example, he mentions how the rules for properly riding a bike or driving a car differ from one social context to another. Such background tacit understandings are not and indeed cannot be adequately articulated by any person or group. A person can learn these rules through a broadly based tacit process of socialization that one picks up by dwelling in the area. Hence the understanding gained is a form of what Collins calls Collective Tacit Knowledge (CTC).

While at one time Turner may have wanted to dispense with talking about tacit knowledge, that is not his considered position now. In a review of *Tacit Knowledge* by G&T, he distinguishes two very different conceptions of tacit knowledge, one with which he identifies and one manifest in the book by G&T. The view Turner identifies with

takes tacit knowledge to be a generic term for an actual phenomenon: the background to action and thought that is captured by such terms as "political tradition" and "culture," and in science by such notions as paradigm, and beyond this, such things as laboratory skills and skills of many other kinds that can't be reduced to verbal instructions, such as the knowledge of a good manager or of the team players in an effective work group.⁵

The view of analytic epistemology within which G&T work

is not concerned with such things as the actualities of science ... For this kind of epistemology, tacit knowledge is a puzzling concept, even an impossible category, because it cannot conform to the standard definition of "knowledge" as justified true belief. Nothing "tacit" can be, by definition, justified: justification is an explicit act ... This problem overlaps with another issue. Justification is a normative concept ... What these thinkers typically believe is that there is a realm called "the space of reasons," governed by normative relations; that "concept" is a normative concept, as is intention; that there is a radical difference between animals

⁴ Collins 2013b, 118.

⁵ Turner 2014-2015, 33.

and humans, because the latter partake in the space of reasons and are bound by the normative constraints that go with reasons.⁶

Polanyi joins with Turner in accepting the first view of the tacit dimension sketched out above. However, Polanyi's view of the tacit includes unconscious components and physiological processes that underlie skills and explicit knowing; his understanding of the tacit is thus more expansive than even Turner's.⁷ Polanyi emphasized the tacit components involved in all acts of knowing because he was concerned to counter the notion that there is such a thing as purely objective knowledge, a concern quite different than what Collins speculates was the origin of interest in the tacit, namely thoughts about what sorts of knowledge can be programmed in a computer.⁸

In my view, the analytic understanding of the tacit is so narrowly constrained as to be of limited interest. G&T are to be commended because they, influenced by Wittgenstein, take a step within the analytic tradition beyond the belief that knowledge must by definition be explicitly "codifiable."⁹ They claim a space for a context-dependent species of practical tacit knowledge that is intentionally articulated in action but does not require a linguistic base to be counted as knowledge.¹⁰

The various notions of the tacit just described seem to justify my claim that the three books offer interpretations of different aspects (some of which may partially overlap) of tacit phenomena. Turner's view is the most inclusive of the three. Collins's view, it should be remembered, includes besides Collective Tacit Knowledge two other domains of the tacit, Relational Tacit Knowledge (RTC) and Somatic Tacit Knowledge (STC). He considers RTC and STC just as important as CTC.¹¹

Note that RTC, knowledge which some persons have but is unknown to others, identifies a realm that can be called tacit but which has not been recognized as such by other investigators—again, vis-à-vis Moodey's claim, a different aspect of the tacit. Also note that the very way Collins defines tacit knowledge—as that which "cannot be seen or captured" in contrast to explicit knowledge, which "can be deliberately brought into existence at distant locations"—differs from the more functional views of Turner and G&T.¹² They think the tacit as background can often be explicitly analyzed when its components are examined apart from their functional role.

Turner notes that Collins's writing is marked by "its lack of detailed reference to the arguments of other writers."¹³ Collins's introduction of the term "strings" is an example. He claims explicit knowledge is dependent on interpreting "strings." Collins notes the

⁶ Turner 2014-2015, 33-34.

⁷ See Gulick 2015, 5-8.

⁸ See Collins 2013a, 7.

⁹ See, for instance, G&T 2013, 133.

¹⁰ G&T 2013, 191-192.

¹¹ Collins 2013b, 115.

¹² Collins 2013a, 5.

¹³ Turner 2014, 55.

absence of response to his discussion of the explicit,¹⁴ but he would have encouraged discussion had he more clearly shown that “strings” are a physical manifestation of Shannon information,¹⁵ and that his use of the contrast between digital and analog strings has precedent in such works as Jesper Hoffmeyer’s *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*.

Three Matters of Consideration

Actually, I think the apparent disagreement that Moodey has with my depiction of the tacit in the three books is not deep and may turn on slightly different uses of terminology. The fault lines Moodey outlines between the authors is instructive and on target.¹⁶ In fact, I am in accord with Moodey’s generous response on all but three remaining minor points.

First, he seems to think that I view the books as “complementary interpretations of different aspects of the tacit.”¹⁷ However, he also acknowledges what is the case, that I find Turner’s understanding of the tacit to be most amenable to further development (as he does also). To be complementary, the books would ideally deal with different aspects of the same phenomena at the same level of understanding. Instead they examine the tacit from the perspective of different disciplinary levels. Granted the assumptions they operate from, each of the books is competent and instructive, but together they do not cohere as complementary contributors to an insightful whole.

To be sure, an understanding of different levels of human functioning is important. At the end of my article I have tried to suggest what the components of such a holistic, many-layered understanding of the tacit are. In particular, I believe the dismissal by both G&T and Collins of animal evidence concerning the origins and provenance of tacit abilities—interpreting their lack of linguistic ability as making them no more than glorified machines—is a fundamental mistake.¹⁸

Second, I don’t think either Turner or Moodey need to totally reject Collins’s understanding of CTC. A good part of the blame for their apparent rejection must be laid on Collins himself with his choice of the term “collective” along with its semi-Durkheimian elaboration. The social phenomena Collins calls collective seem better described by such terms as elusive, protean, local, and faddish. Collins suggests one can gain knowledge of these phenomena through a vague process of socialization, that is, by alertly dwelling in the locale where they pertain.

Collins is correct in claiming that humans have “the ability to absorb ways of going on from the surrounding society without being able to articulate the rules in detail”; learning by imitation, as an apprentice learns from a master, would be an example.¹⁹ However, I think Turner is also on target in suggesting that it is individuals who often gain

¹⁴ Collins 2013b, 127.

¹⁵ See Gleick 2012, 168-281.

¹⁶ Moodey 2016, 1-3.

¹⁷ Moodey 2016, 1.

¹⁸ See Gulick 2012-2013, 18-33.

¹⁹ Collins 2010, 125.

knowledge of these phenomena through quite ordinary social processes. Nevertheless, Collins seems correct in suggesting there is a loosely defined region of social knowledge with the elusive, tacit characteristics of CTC. Where the discussion seems to break down is, on Collins's side, calling the phenomena "collective" supported by a network of interlinked brains, and on Turner's side, worrying overmuch about how such knowledge is shared or transmitted. The "sharing" does not have to include identical content and be known by all members of a society to be sufficient to support a statistical generalization about the unique knowledge members of a specific society (or even a locale) rely upon.

Third, Moodey²⁰ and Turner²¹ seem bothered that Charles Taylor is not more explicit about the metaphorical nature of "framework," a term that he sometimes uses. But clearly people in medieval Europe had different views about what is most meaningful in life than we do. Such terms as "framework" or "social imaginary" name the collection of typical beliefs, practices, and attitudes regnant in a certain social setting in a particular era. To take a term like framework in a wooden rather than metaphorical way (as something that can be "read off" is Turner's term, not Taylor's) betrays a lack of understanding that language is metaphor-laden, and not every instance needs to be so named.

My final naming, however, is one of thanks to Richard Moodey for his thoughtful spirit of inquiry.

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²⁰ Moodey 2016, 5.

²¹ Turner 2014, 5.

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