

Response to Gulick: Complementarity, Fault Lines, Terminology, Metaphors and Assertions

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Walter Gulick and I agree that Stephen Turner's is the best of three recent interpretations of the tacit dimension. Turner provides a more accurate interpretation of Michael Polanyi's work and points out more fruitful lines of development. As Gulick says, some of the differences between the two of us "turn on slightly different uses of terminology."¹ In what follows, I focus on some of those disagreements, but I want to emphasize that I agree with most of what Gulick has written about these three books specifically, and about the tacit dimension more generally.

Complementarity

One disagreement that might go deeper than terminology is my reaction to Gulick's statement that it "seems best" to view the three books as "interpretations of different aspects of a very complex subject."² I said that it is better to view them as "contradictory answers to some of the same questions." But I misinterpreted him when I added that he viewed them as *complementary* interpretations. He corrected me by explaining why he does not view them as complementary:

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.³

Although I agree that the books "do not cohere as complementary contributors to an insightful whole," I do not agree that the differences between them are the result of the *disciplinary* differences of the authors. The fault lines are *within* disciplines.

Fault Lines and Questions

Gulick says that I did not specify the questions to which (I say) the books provide contradictory answers.⁴ I see three questions related to the two fault lines that divide the books and their authors. The fault line that separates Collins⁵ and Turner⁶ from Gascoigne and Thornton⁷ results from contradictory answers to the first two questions below, and the fault line that separates Collins from Turner results from contradictory answers to the third question.

¹ Gulick 2016, 9.

² Gulick 2015, 23.

³ Gulick 2016, 9.

⁴ Gulick 2016, 6.

⁵ Harry Collins 2010.

⁶ Stephen P. Turner 2014.

⁷ Neil Gascoigne and Tim Thornton 2013.

1. *Should the findings of the natural and social sciences be incorporated into philosophical accounts of knowing?* Gascoigne and Thornton’s “no” is contradicted by the “yes” of both Collins and Turner.
2. *Is it important to specify knowing agents?* Gascoigne and Thornton’s “no” is contradicted by the “yes” of both Collins and Turner.
3. *Are collectivities epistemic agents?* Turner’s “no” is contradicted by the “yes” of Collins.

Contradictory answers to the first question generate a fault line that divides philosophers into opposing camps. Perhaps it also divides the philosophers who say “no” from scientists who study human and animal cognition, but I regard it as primarily a division within philosophy, and only secondarily as a division between *some* philosophers and scientists. There are, of course, other philosophical disagreements that are routinely used to put philosophers into contending camps.⁸

The contradictory answers to the second and third questions generate fault lines that cut across, rather than between, disciplines in which cognition is an object of inquiry. The divisions run through philosophy, theology, the humanities and the social sciences, but not through mathematics, physics or chemistry. They are questions at the heart of Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*. In his “Preface,” he wrote:

I start by rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment. In the exact sciences, this false ideal is perhaps harmless, for it is in fact disregarded there by scientists. But we shall see that it exercises a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science. I want to establish an alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally.⁹

Gulick echoes those words of Polanyi when he says that “one of his original intentions was to disabuse those who championed objectivist, disembodied knowledge as the epistemological ideal.”¹⁰ He also says that Polanyi might have prevented misinterpretations of his alternative ideal had he called it “personal knowing” rather than “personal knowledge.” Gulick says, “The title of his magnum opus ... should more accurately be called *Personal Knowing*.”¹¹ Not only do I agree with this assertion, I also say that Turner recognizes this by entitling his book *Understanding the Tacit* rather than “Understanding Tacit Knowledge.”

All acts of knowing—regardless of the disciplinary affiliation of the knower—are acts of *persons*. Gulick, Turner and I stand with Polanyi on this, but Collins and Gascoigne and

⁸ Randall Collins 1998.

⁹ Polanyi 1958, vii.

¹⁰ Gulick 2015, 8.

¹¹ Gulick 2015, 9.

Thornton do not. Collins insists that *collectivities*, as well as individual persons, perform acts of knowing. Gascoigne and Thornton still cling to the ideal of detached, impersonal knowledge.

Terminological Preferences

The following passage provides an example of terminological differences between Gulick and me. He writes:

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.¹²

I can't speak for Turner, but I prefer to say that I "*contradict* some of Collins's *assertions*" rather than "*totally reject* Collins's *understanding*." I know neither Collins's acts of understanding nor his memories of those acts. I do know what he wrote. This is the point at which I appeal to Polanyi's "Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading."¹³ Collins "gave sense" *from* his personal background *to* the words he wrote. I "read sense" *from* my distinctively different personal background *to* the words Collins wrote. Perhaps, as Gulick suggests, Collins has misled us by using the term "collective" and appealing to the authority of Durkheim. But I read Collins as taking his use of those words seriously, and explicitly *contradict* some of the sentences in which he used them.

I ask two quite distinct questions about Collins's assertions:

- (1) What did he mean when he wrote them?
- (2) Is what *I believe he meant* (probably) true or (probably) false?

If the meaning I attribute to one of Collins's declarative sentences is too different from what he really meant, then I do not contradict what he actually asserted, but only my mistaken interpretation of him. A better interpreter of Collins's words might be able to persuade me that my interpretation is so far off the mark that what I deny is not what Collins meant. For example, Gulick has persuaded me that I had misinterpreted him when I said that he viewed the three books as "complementary." As yet, however, no one has been able to persuade me that Collins does not *really* mean that collectivities perform acts of knowing. So I persist in contradicting those sentences of his in which he either asserts or assumes that collectivities are epistemic agents.

I say that in describing and explaining the tacit dimension, the distinction between what's skin-in and skin-out is very important. Collins flatly denies this:

... there is simply nothing special about the boundaries of the skull or the

¹² Gulick 2016, 9.

¹³ Polanyi 1969.

skin. My brain's connections do not stop at the boundaries of my head, because they are not limited by the connections found within the grey matter; my brain's neurons are connected to the neurons of every other brain with which it is 'in touch' via my five senses ... The metaphysically bashful can just think of all brains linked by speech as making up one big neural net.¹⁴

Anyone, whether metaphysically bashful or bold, who understands what Collins meant when he wrote those lines real does *think* of brains linked as making up "one big neural net." But there a big difference between thinking this and affirming it as true. It is analogous to the difference between understanding what another might mean by saying that there's a unicorn in the woods, and affirming it as true. Further, I assert that *persons*, rather than *brains*, are linked by speech. The social relations that are established and maintained by verbal communication are very different from the synaptic connections that link the neurons in a person's brain and nervous system. I flatly deny that Collins's verbal communications with others create synaptic connections between his brain and the brains of those others. I assert that there is indeed something very special about the boundaries of his skull and skin, and about the boundaries of every person's skull and skin.

"Framework" as Metaphor

Gulick's response to my agreement with Turner's criticism of Charles Taylor requires a brief comment. I agree with Gulick that language is so metaphor-laden that it would be foolish to try to be explicit about every metaphor one uses.¹⁵ But I also believe that when a writer expresses a core idea metaphorically, it is good to call attention to that metaphor. It seems to me that Taylor uses "framework" to point to one of his core ideas. Turner¹⁶ quotes Taylor¹⁷: "Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgments, intuitions, or reactions." Taylor asserts this, rather than putting it forward as a hypothesis to be considered and debated.

I agree with Turner that Taylor's presentation of his position would have been richer and clearer had he been explicit about the metaphorical character of his use of "framework." I do not know whether or not Taylor imagines this "framework" to be something real inside the skin of each person who "shares" it. Is it somehow analogous to the human skeleton, which provides a solid framework for all of the soft tissues of the body? Or is this "framework" outside the skins of individual persons, in a way that is analogous to what (I think) Durkheim meant by "collective consciousness" or to what (I think) Plato meant by the realm of subsistent ideas? Or does Taylor imagine this "framework" as being something that is somehow both inside and outside the skins of those who "share" it?

¹⁴ Collins 2010, 132.

¹⁵ Gulick 2016, 10.

¹⁶ Turner 2014, 7.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor 1989, 26.

I suspect that Gulick and I agree upon the general principle that there should be a balance between the false claim that there are no metaphors in a text, and the impossible dream of being pedantically explicit about every metaphor in it. But we probably still disagree about whether or not Taylor's account would have been richer and clearer had he paid more attention to the metaphorical nature of his "frameworks."

Assertions

In conclusion, I want to explain my repeated use of "assert" and "assertion." In an section of *Personal Knowledge* called "The Nature of Assertions," Polanyi said that "in a strict usage, the same symbol should never represent the act of sincerely asserting something and the content of what is asserted."¹⁸ He says that Frege's signpost symbol |-- could be a way of representing the *act* of assertion, and *p* as the symbol representing the *content* of what is asserted. But an act of assertion is always performed by a specific person at a specific time, and the signpost symbol, by itself, fails to answer the reader's "who" and "when" questions. "An unasserted sentence," he wrote, "is no better than an unsigned cheque; just paper and ink without power or meaning."¹⁹ Polanyi rejected Whitehead and Russell's impersonal translation of the signpost symbol into the words, "it is asserted that *p*." He said that the personal "I believe *p*" is better, but still conveys the misleading impression that the signpost symbol can be translated into a sentence. He asserted (without using the signpost symbol) that the words "I believe" in "I believe *p*" *do not* constitute a sentence. "They are more in the nature of an exclamation like 'By Jove!' or thumping on the table; they seal a commitment, a vouching or asseveration."²⁰

Collins wrote: "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."²¹ This was his way of expressing a personal commitment, of shouting "By Jove," and banging his fist on the table. When I say that I contradict those sentences of his in which he asserts that collectivities are epistemic agents or that networks of persons constitute one big neural network, this is my way of shouting "By Jove," and banging my fist on the table."

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¹⁸ Polanyi 1958, 27.

¹⁹ Polanyi 1958, 28.

²⁰ Polanyi 1958, 28-29.

²¹ Collins 2011-2012, 39.

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