

The “Tacit” and the “Personal”: An Aesthetical Approach to the Nature of Knowledge¹

Gabriella Ujlaki

ABSTRACT Key words: judgment, perception, conception, personal, tacit, art, integration , Kant, post-critical epistemology.

Polanyi’s post-critical epistemology is empirical and not transcendental but it grounds knowledge in perception; knowledge is thus primarily aesthetical and only partly conceptual. The conceptual is always embedded in the perceptual and comprehension or judgment always has an integrative structure. Polanyi’s tacit knowledge is pre-conscious and must be distinguished from the personal which implies conscious commitment. If knowledge produces a cathartic effect, then it is more than merely tacit. The Polanyian revolution in epistemology argues that the human ability to reach truth through use of our cognitive powers is an art.

The main purpose of my paper is to throw new light on the fundamental notions of Michael Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy, especially that of the “tacit” and the “personal” as the grounds of his paradigm-shift in epistemology. My starting point is based on the fact that according to Polanyi all knowledge is rooted in tacit, perceptual judgments, whether sensory or propositional/conceptual. Having claimed that all knowledge must be rooted in our tacit powers, Polanyi renews an old request in philosophy for establishing a brand of epistemology based on sensory knowledge (or perception) as a way of cognition equally important to conceptual thinking. Aesthetics, conceived as a field of sensory knowledge, was claimed to be a branch of philosophy that owes its birth to the ancient principle of “tabula rasa”: “Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu.” Art was not the main subject of this branch of philosophy and not even the most important, as we can observe in Baumgarten’s or Kant’s works. Aesthetics at the time was considered in a broad sense a theory of perceptual knowledge. In this case, art was merely a good example of how we reach knowledge through visual or any other type of perceptual judgments before we can account for it in conceptual terms. Polanyi emphasizes that “all comprehension is informal and personal: this is the real theme of the *Third Critique*.” And “the very nature of knowledge is in the *Third Critique* not in the *First Critique*.”² He also remarks that “the experience of external objects is an act of tacit comprehension and it is phantastic to represent it with Kant as a formal conceptual deduction from a priori categories. . . . This leaves little of the *First Critique* standing. For all a priori is to be understood rather (though not altogether) in the sense of the *Third Critique*.”³ We do not need a more persuasive argument of the fact that, according to Polanyi, the nature of knowledge is closer to tacit, perceptual judgments than to conceptual, abstract thinking. This also applies to the way we appreciate, or what amounts to the same thing, the way we comprehend, natural and artificial objects and among them works of art. Consequently my starting point is that in Polanyi’s view the nature of knowledge is mainly aesthetical and only partly conceptual, and the latter is always embedded in the former. Obviously Polanyi’s theory of knowledge is not a kind of transcendental aesthetics in the Kantian sense. On the contrary, Polanyi’s theory is fully empirical. Tacit knowing is a-critical: we cannot deduce it from critical assertions or from any a priori categories. It has a special logical form; it is neither deductive nor inductive: Polanyi calls it “integration”. It is the ground of the two other logical forms; therefore, all comprehension has to have an integrative structure. The tacit side of knowledge teaches us that our power to understand art is no

different from our ability to comprehend any other kind of thing.

Knowledge, however, has a personal side as well. This point can be expressed in the maxim: “no knowledge without a knower.”⁵⁴ The knower is existentially connected with the known. The idea is that if a person gets to know something new, if he or she discovers something, that will change his or her entire life. Thus we come to the conclusion that knowledge also may have a cathartic effect, although it occurs only when our previously established framework of knowledge has to be changed. The cathartic change needs the personal act of commitment and though it is rooted in our tacit powers still it is not fully tacit. We have to recognize that there is a fundamental distinction between the tacit and the personal in Polanyi’s theory. We share tacit knowledge with animals, because it is pre-conscious, it is necessary but not a sufficient condition of consciousness. Perception, orientation in space and time, or even understanding speech do not require consciousness or reflection. As I will try to demonstrate later, a person can master these tacit powers in practice as a skill without being able to tell someone else how to do it. The tacit is not the personal: “the act of knowing includes an appraisal, and this personal coefficient, which shapes all factual knowledge, bridges in doing so the disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity. It implies the claim that man can transcend his own subjectivity by striving passionately to fulfil his personal obligations to universal standards.”⁵⁵ An appraisal cannot be fully tacit in the sense of being pre-conscious because it needs commitment. “It is the act of commitment in its full structure that saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective.”⁵⁶ And “if I, as a subject, responsibly and actively make an assertion. . . also by the very same act submit myself to something beyond me.”⁵⁷ Although we cannot fully explicate the reason for our commitment, because it is rooted in our tacit powers, still we consciously commit ourselves to something beyond us. Unless we find that what is beyond us deserves our choice, we will not commit ourselves to it. Therefore it is not sufficient to be only subsidiarily aware of our personal obligation for committing ourselves; we have to be focally aware of our decision, otherwise we cannot call it a personal act. So the distinction between the “tacit” and the “personal” is that a tacit, perceptual judgment can be full pre-conscious, while a personal act of appraisal, though embedded in our tacit powers, cannot be completely devoid of consciousness.

However, a conscious choice is not, by the same act, a responsible one. It can also be conscious and subjective, it will not claim universal validity. In contrast to the subjective a personal act has to meet universal standards, as Polanyi emphasized. But if I, as a subject make a claim beyond myself, then, by the same act, I have to submit myself to standards which are not purely mine, so I have to transcend myself. Transcending subjectivity amounts to accepting the judgments of a given group or society, which means submitting to intersubjective standards. These, in turn, determine the value of the personal act of appraisal. What we are committed to, whether it is tradition, religion, social lore, or a political faith, or whatever, is always embedded in society. The universal validity of our commitment can only be evaluated from the viewpoint of the society we belong to. So a commitment “which saves personal from being merely subjective” will introduce a new element, a new level, that belongs to society, into our subject matter. On the one hand, the social validity of our choices saves them from being merely subjective while, on the other hand, our belief in the propriety of our decision makes us feel it our own, personal choice. Hence if we want to demarcate more precisely the tacit from the personal we will recognize more different features between them than between the levels of consciousness. I would rather say that they are different from this viewpoint because they belong to different levels of reality. I would complete the maxim “no knowledge without a knower” with its possible cathartic effect. If knowledge produces a cathartic effect then it is more than merely tacit. As we have already noticed, it occurs only when we have to change a previously established framework of knowledge; and this act needs a conscious decision which cannot be fully “pre-conscious”, tacit. Our decisions are made by means of commitment, hence we raise the choice to the personal level. Thus, if our knowledge has to be changed it will have to occur by means of a commitment, through a personal act of

appraisal: and this act will possibly have a cathartic effect which, in turn, highlights the aesthetical nature of knowledge.

Thus on the tacit level the aesthetical nature of knowledge lies in the fact that it comes about as a perceptual “pre-conscious” judgment, while on the personal level it manifests itself in its cathartic effect.

There is a third argument for my proposal about the aesthetical nature of knowledge. According to Polanyi “the very nature of knowledge is in the *Third Critique*”. He means that knowledge takes place as an aesthetic judgment. An act of judgment occurs in a subjective but universal act of appraisal. And since every judgment may be regarded as putting parts in relation to a whole, it follows that all judgment is synthesis, or, to use Polanyi’s term, “integration”. The aesthetic judgment in its Kantian sense is very close to the tacit act of integration. Integration is subjective or, more precisely, personal because it is universal and necessary, but it lacks the intervention of a reflective idea. Hence it is also tacit or rooted in our tacit powers. But Polanyian personal knowledge is nevertheless not a renewed kind of Kantian aesthetic judgment. The main difference between them, according to Polanyi, is that the act of integration is the only way we discover something new or, generally speaking, we get to know something at all; while according to Kant “the judgment of taste” contributes in no way to cognition. The Kantian judgment simply expresses the felt harmony in the play of our own powers on the occasion of a certain perception. Kant considered the pure aesthetic judgment subjective: it exists only in and for a percipient. Therefore in a pure judgment of taste we will not reach any knowledge, according to Kant. Aesthetic judgment excludes objectivity, and hence it excludes knowledge as well. In contrast to this view, Polanyi takes the tacit act of integration as the most important way of cognition.

So the Polanyian revolution in epistemology, which highlights the aesthetical nature of knowledge, is not limited to the assertion that art also has a cognitive side and can reach the truth by virtue of this feature (Gadamer, Heidegger). However, Polanyi turned this question upside down: our ability to reach truth, or our cognitive powers, is also a kind of art. In this sense art regains its former, ancient meaning: “the art of knowing” is a faculty of man that is rooted in our perceptual judgments and everyday skills and is a ground for our intellectual powers.

Endnotes

¹Editor's note: reprinted with permission from *Polanyiana* 2:1-2 (1992) : 127-129; the abstract is an editorial addition.

²A letter from Marjorie Grene, 13 October 1959. In: University of Chicago, Joseph Regenstein Library, Polanyi Papers.

³Ibid.

⁴Marjorie Grene: *The Knower and the Known*, Faber & Faber, London, 1966.

⁵Michael Polanyi: *Personal Knowledge*, The University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 4.

⁶Ibid., p. 65.

⁷Marjorie Grene: "The Subjective and the Personal", address at the Kent State University Polanyi Conference in Apr. 1991; manuscript forthcoming in one of the next issues of *Polanyiana* [Editor’s note: published in *Polanyiana* 2:4/3:1 ((1993): 43-55.]