

# How Clinchy's Two Minds Might Become One Flesh: A Response to Blythe Clinchy's Essays

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*This essay explores the contribution that the thought of Michael Polanyi might make to the work in developmental epistemology of Blythe Clinchy and her colleagues in the Women's Ways of Knowing project. In turn, the potential contribution of Clinchy's work to Polanyi studies is explored. Both have much of value to share with the other. While Clinchy's conceptualization of "connected knowing" as a complement to "separate knowing" is insightful and rich in its implications, Polanyi's post-critical understanding of human knowing provides a fuller, indeed comprehensive, philosophical understanding of the nature, importance, and dynamics of the two, the priority of connected to separate knowing, even when it seems to be absent, and how the two fit together.*

## **Polanyi's Relevance to Clinchy's Work and Women's Ways of Knowing (WWK).**

On reading Blythe Clinchy's two essays, "Connected and Separate Knowing: Toward a Marriage of Two Minds"<sup>1</sup> and "Beyond Subjectivism,"<sup>2</sup> from the perspective afforded me by Polanyi's work, what I find is a discovery of some of the same features of human knowing uncovered by Polanyi: the priority of knowing as act and process to knowledge as result or thing; the personal participation of the knower in all aspects of knowing; indwelling, pouring oneself into a thing to be known and understood; the priority of acritical empathic believing in all knowing ventures; personal participation as positively contributing to an objective grasp of the object known, in contrast with uncritical subjective projection; knowing as a collaborative effort involving many persons and many uniquely distinct perspectives; comprehension as transformative of the self of the knower; etc.

While convergent in many ways, Clinchy's approach to human knowing is, however, not coincident with Polanyi. Clinchy comes at many of the same issues and insights that we find in Polanyi from a surprising angle – namely, from a study of how contemporary female Ivy League undergraduates reflect on how they go about knowing.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, it is the common features with Polanyi just mentioned that Clinchy and her associates discover to be typically characteristic (though not exclusively) of women's ways of knowing, in contrast with the dominant paradigm of how to go about knowing in the academy, with which male undergraduates seem to be more ready to identify.<sup>4</sup> This dominant paradigm is clearly what is identified by Polanyi as modern critical, Enlightenment epistemology. In effect, Clinchy and her associates are distancing themselves from this dominant epistemology and moving toward what Polanyi calls a "post-critical epistemology" by bringing to light strategies of knowing in an academic context to which women tend spontaneously to resort.

Interestingly, I find in Clinchy's work (and that of the collaboration of which her work is a part) a kind of inductive process of doing epistemology – which is natural, given that her primary specialization is developmental psychology, but quite different from how Polanyi proceeds. (However, it must be said that Polanyi's basis for doing epistemology and philosophy of science being his own first hand experience and that of his colleagues in the natural sciences bears some analogy with this aspect of Clinchy's work.) With the aid of other researchers in this field (especially William Perry<sup>5</sup>), Clinchy inductively identifies different stages of epistemological development in the thinking of undergraduates and a different trajectory of typical development followed by women from that followed by the primarily male undergraduates studied by Perry. (I happen to think Polanyi would find Clinchy's account genuinely fascinating.) While Clinchy's work begins with observation and description (based on interviews), she moves quickly and seamlessly to critical appreciation and judgment regarding the cognitive moves made by her subjects, appealing to criteria employed in her subjects' knowing – i.e., from is to ought, from fact to norm – especially as she moves up the stages of development and maturity in knowing. This is remarkably similar to the way Polanyi speaks of the biological study of living organisms as critical, involving the assessment of how successfully they achieve the realization of principles inherent in their life processes, and to the way Polanyi speaks of the continuity of critical appreciation involved in the study of life processes from the most primitive forms of life to the most sophisticated of human achievements.<sup>6</sup> (Polanyi calls this spectrum of gradually increasing personal participation and indwelling in the study of life “ultra-biology” in *PK*.<sup>7</sup>) So also and again like Polanyi, Clinchy's study culminates in a shared convivial submission to, and commitment to, the same firmament of values she finds in her subjects' cognitive efforts, especially those at higher levels of development.

Another remarkable thing in Clinchy's work from a Polanyian philosophical perspective is the way she relates to the undergraduate subjects of her study as not just going through changes in how they go about knowing, but as going through changes that are reflective and self-consciously induced – meta-changes in their knowing, as it were – thus changes that are essentially philosophical, hence epistemological, in nature. She studies them as they engage in philosophical reflection on their own and on each other's knowing – whether the classroom content be philosophy, science, sociology, or literature. She relates to her subjects not as objectified things at a distance, but in full respect as human beings in a person-to-person way. Moreover, her developing conception of “connected knowing” drawn from the comments of female subjects of the Women's *Ways of Knowing* (*WWK*) project itself provides justification for the empathic methodology she embodies in her practice. Each of these points is remarkable in itself and worthy of extended discussion; but I must move on.

Clinchy identifies two models or paradigms of knowing – “connected knowing” and “separate knowing.”<sup>8</sup> This involves strategies of drawing near and collaboration and the other involving strategies of distance and disputation. These, according to Clinchy, are respectively manifested in the ways of knowing typified by more mature undergraduate women within the group being studied on the one hand and more mature undergraduate men on the other (within the group studied by William Perry), but not exclusively so. In any case, the features she finds characteristic of women's ways of knowing are the ones closest to features characteristic of tacit knowing in Polanyi's account. The features found characteristic of undergraduate men's ways of knowing (in Perry's research and in tangential anecdotes related in Clinchy's study) are ones one might identify with explicit knowing. But to put it this way would be misleading. One might think first of a correlation between Clinchy's distinction between connected knowing and separate knowing with Polanyi's distinction between explicit knowing and tacit knowing. I think a better and closer correlation would be with Polanyi's distinction between the paradigm of knowing characteristic of the modern critical movement (which

has pursued the ideal of total explicitness and remains dominant in our institutions of higher learning today) and that characteristic of the post-critical (or constructively post-modern) movement he sought to establish (which appreciates the tacit underpinnings of all of our knowing and grounds explicit knowing in a tacit, a-critical indwelling of things). But this correlation, while closer, is not exact either, for Polanyi's post-critical conception of personal knowing is not set directly in opposition to what Clinchy speaks of as separate knowing, as is connected knowing. Consequently, Polanyi's post-critical conception of personal knowing should not be identified as such with Clinchy's model of connected knowing, or vice versa.

Rather, Polanyi's post-critical conception of personal knowledge, at least in my understanding, is intended to transcend and overcome the opposition between connection and separation: to incorporate both methodological believing and methodological doubting, both tacit and explicit dimensions, both acquaintance knowledge and representative knowledge, both intuitive synthesis and destructive analysis, both sides of C. P. Snow's *Two Cultures*, etc. – though none of these pairs (which I do not take to be equivalent distinctions) in some kind of equal balance. Both Polanyi and Clinchy seek to overcome a false, destructive, oppositional understanding of the two paradigms of separate and connected knowing in what Clinchy proposes to call “a marriage of two minds” and in what she occasionally calls “constructed knowledge.” The latter is nowhere explained in these essays, but a fuller explanation of it can be found in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, which provides a context that she takes for granted in these essays.<sup>9</sup> In any case, Clinchy, in these two essays, has not yet brought off the integration or synthesis she avowedly seeks; she has not yet shown how the two, as she describes them, can be happily married – indeed, tongue in cheek she calls her identification with both paradigms a somewhat embarrassing polygamy. From the perspective of her work, that integration needs yet to be accomplished. One value, then, for Polanyi's thought, of the work of Clinchy and WWK is setting out a clear basis for recognizing what is needed, a solution for one of the principal cultural problems which Polanyi is principally concerned to address. What Clinchy is seeking in these essays (or perhaps I should say, on the basis of these essays) is a post-critical epistemology – and it is recognition of certain prominent features of women's ways of knowing in contrast with the dominant paradigm of separate knowing that points the way and for which it provides one of the better clues.

How do the two – connected and separate knowing – fit together? Simply given the characterization of each as Clinchy presents them, it is hard to conceive how they might belong together. Part of the problem is that, viewed from a Polanyian perspective, as described by Clinchy both are to some extent partial and incomplete – as she herself admits. In a Polanyian perspective one might say that, rightly and maturely practiced, the one is never wholly without the other. Let me make the same point using somewhat different but related categories closer to Polanyi's own thought: tacit knowledge by acquaintance (which is close in meaning to Clinchy's connected human knowing but not an exact equivalent) is never without the possibility, if not the presence, of knowledge by representation (at least for human knowing). It is representation of what is tacitly known by acquaintance (e.g., in the form of a map) that makes possible reflection on that acquaintance knowledge at a distance – i.e., it is representation that makes possible separate knowing. Inversely, knowledge by representation is never without the active presence of knowledge by acquaintance, never without a tacit dimension – though of course the latter may be simply assumed, repressed, or ignored.

One of Polanyi's key strategies in *PK* and elsewhere is to document how the most strict and rigorous of the natural sciences and mathematics is rooted and grounded in tacit knowing. (This goes far beyond any of the claims made by Clinchy or her colleagues.) Similarly, it might help if some Polanyi-informed scholar were to write an account of the tacit dimension of *separate* knowing (noting its elements of connected knowing)

– i.e., the kind of adversarial, analytic mode of professional academic disputation that typifies separate knowing – both at its best and at its worst. Actually, considered in this way, “separate knowing” appears less an entire way of knowing unto itself than a phase of the knowing process presupposing there having come into play determinate representations or claims about the matters at hand, which of course would have to rely on tacit processes of coming up with promising representations involving more connected strategies of knowing. [By the way, there is room for new Polanyian work in ferreting out the tacit dimension of what is involved in the distinction between formal reasoning (or formal logic) and the context dependent nature of what has come to be called informal reasoning (or informal logic). The work of Stephen Toulmin among several others is relevant here.<sup>10</sup>]

As well it might help to develop an account of the explicit, representative dimension of connected knowing (involving such elements as the role of narratives mentioned by Clinchy), and how it (that dimension of connected knowing) is similar to and different from the explicit dimension of separate knowing. So also, it would help to identify, first, a range of example intellectual problems where strategies of connected knowing are indispensable and irreplaceable by strategies of separate knowing (e.g., in communicating between frames of reference that do not share the same presuppositions), second, a range of example problems where strategies of separate knowing are more directly relevant, and, third, a range of example problems where the two need to work together and/or alternate.

In sum, Polanyi’s understanding of human knowing does not dichotomize connected and separate knowing at all – except occasionally as parts or phases of a whole to which they belong (though not simply as two halves of one whole). In effect, their separation is an illusion. They are not meant to stand alone (which is not to say that specific social intellectual contexts might not conspire to restrict what is verbalized to one or the other). Part of the illusion of their separation from each other comes from abstractly juxtaposing strategies of knowing appropriate for two quite different subject matters, subject matters located at two very different points along the continuous spectrum of the study of living organisms (the spectrum Polanyi in *PK* calls ‘ultra-biology’<sup>11</sup>). (Actually, this is partly evidenced by the different subject matter contexts from which illustrative quotes are taken in Clinchy’s account.) Thus, at one end of the spectrum, the non-living, inanimate end, there is relatively little personal participation called for on the part of the knower – so little that it can be explicitly ignored or simply left out of account without significant cost; here a strategy of separate knowing may be quite relevant. But at the other end, profound imaginative empathy and sympathy is called for by what is being investigated – e.g., simply to understand, say, the intention of a cultural gesture in its own context, let alone assess it in terms of some external criterion. Here personal narratives – both of the subjects being studied and, reflectively, of the person conducting the study – may need to be taken into account and generally strategies of connected knowing will be particularly relevant. My point is that different subject matters require different epistemological strategies. Problems, of course, arise where persons are not open to discovering hitherto unnoticed aspects of a given subject matter because they are stuck in the rut of considering it, usually reductively, from the perspective of one strategy only. Moreover, at the human end of the spectrum of ultra-biology, once connected strategies of knowing issue in determinate explicit claims, there may be a role for adversarial debate characteristic of separate knowing. In short, it may not pay to expend energy contrasting and contesting the respective relevance of connected and separate knowing in the abstract. For once they are applied to particular subject matters, the question of what is appropriate and what is not will very often resolve itself.

Were the WWK project and the legacy of its influence to acquire a Polanyian understanding of the

relations between what is called separate knowing and connected knowing, it would I think be relieved of having to play defense vis-à-vis the advocates of the dominant separate knowing paradigm and relieved of having to appeal to gender justice to legitimate strategies of connected knowing.

Does Polanyi help us understand how it is that separate and connected knowing have come to seem at odds, how they got “divorced” in the first place? Yes, I think so, through his accounts of (1) the dialectic of intuitive integration and destructive analysis – more on this from the response of Esther Meek to come; (2) the rise to dominance of the modern critical project (that continues to bias academic discussions of “critical thinking”), with its method of doubt and critical suspicion toward any elements of subjectivity; (3) the objectivist theory of scientific knowledge, and scientism; (4) and various movements that have sought to counteract this dominance in romanticism, vitalism, existentialism, empathic methodologies in historiography, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. It’s a long and involved story.

There are in Polanyi other, likely easily overlooked topics of relevance to some of the research of Clinchy and WWK than the ones I mention here. For example, I am thinking of what Polanyi has to say on behalf of decentralized control and spontaneous coordination of independent initiatives. He discusses these topics in connection with his sociological and economic studies. But to my mind they are relevant to epistemology too and specifically to women’s ways of knowing. I won’t take time to go into this here, however.

### **The Relevance of Clinchy’s Work and WWK to Polanyi.**

So far I have been seeking to identify Polanyi’s relevance to WWK and to Clinchy’s work in particular. What about the reverse? On reconsidering Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy from the perspective of WWK and Clinchy’s work in particular, what might they (WWK and Clinchy) be able to contribute to Polanyi studies? What is WWK’s relevance to Polanyi? What have Polanyians to learn from Clinchy’s work? Not being an insider to the WWK movement, I am no doubt venturing to tread on thin ice. But I’d like to venture some possible insights into Polanyi that they could contribute.

First, among serious epistemologists, Polanyi seems to be remarkably non-sexist – despite his use of non-gender-neutral language. By non-sexist I mean not simply being free from overt and obvious gender biases. I mean, if we grant what feminist epistemologists have come to realize about the implicit gender biases implicit in Western conceptions of knowing and being (epistemology and metaphysics) starting back in ancient Greece, Polanyi’s thought is remarkably free of such biases. Why? Possibly because of its groundedness in relational personal knowing that is so characteristic of women’s ways of knowing. Also because he demonstrates the presence of connected knowing throughout human knowledge regardless of the sex of the knower – despite the fact, and ironically because of the fact, that he is/was a male physical scientist. It is amazing that here is someone who has really thoroughly thought through these issues in a systematic and comprehensive way precisely where connected knowing is (wrongly) supposed least likely to belong. WWK, in a way that no other intellectual movement is able to do, can bring to Polanyi studies an appreciation of how sound, complete, and balanced an understanding of human knowing is to be found in Polanyi, especially, but not only, in terms of how it relates to gender issues in epistemology.

Second, and in something of the same vein, Polanyi’s understanding of human knowing and the human condition as a whole embodies a remarkable balance of feminine and masculine elements: drawing near

and distancing, heart and head, right brain and left brain, tacit and explicit, emotion and reason, passion and precision, subjective and objective. WWK can help in making a public case for appreciating the wholeness of vision that characterizes Polanyi's thought, especially in relation to the lack of wholeness characteristic of modern critical thought.

Third, in connection with this, it is I think instructive to compare the kind of critical response and misunderstanding WWK has received from representatives of the dominant paradigm of knowing in the academy with the kind of critical response and misunderstanding that Polanyi has received. It strikes me that the two are remarkably similar in what they are accused of doing. Both have been, and to a large extent still are, marginalized by mainstream epistemological reflection in the discipline of philosophy, precisely because they challenge the hegemony of the separate knowing paradigm. Perhaps students of Polanyi's thought can learn some lessons from the experience of WWK in this respect.

Fourth, juxtaposing Clinchy's account of connected knowing to Polanyi's understanding of tacit knowing (and the tacit dimension of explicit knowing) highlights and underscores how Polanyi's understanding of knowing is fundamentally an embodied *relational* conception. To know is to relate oneself to what is known, to bring oneself into a relational rapport with things. Seen in relation to the mainstream of the Western tradition of epistemology, not just the modern Western tradition, Polanyi is proposing a radical reorientation. That mainstream has taken knowledge to be primarily representational (e.g., in the representative theory of perception and the notion that knowledge is primarily or properly propositional), while dismissing or repressing into obscurity all acquaintance knowledge as well as skill knowledge. On the contrary, Polanyi grounds and documents the dependency of *all* representative knowing in tacit acquaintance knowing.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, Clinchy and WWK can bring to Polanyi studies a special emphasis upon the nature, varieties, and dynamics of empathy and empathic inquiry – which, while far from absent in Polanyi and Polanyi studies, has not received the attention in Polanyi studies that it deserves. I have in mind such things as a Polyanian approach to cultural anthropology and the comparative study of religion, but also a Polyanian approach to understanding art, music and literature.

Sixth, and related to this same point, Clinchy and WWK can bring to Polanyi studies a welcome self-conscious focus and reflection upon the impact Polanyi is having, and should be having, upon how we go about relating to one another as intellectuals in a post-critical intellectual ethos – i.e., more in a connected, collaborative way than in a separate, adversarial way. (E.g., Clinchy says connected knowers ask first not for justification but for clues to what the other is getting at: help at seeing what they see, and what has led them to this point of view, what reasons motivate them; look for what is 'right' or how it could make sense, even in positions that seem initially wrongheaded or strange.) What does it mean to relate to one another on a truly convivial basis, and to what extent should we be not seeking to carry forth and extend the practice of convivial intellectual exchange into other contexts, impacting the various academic ethoi in which we find ourselves and counteracting the otherwise adversarial interchange governed by the paradigm of separate knowing? How can we demonstrate how one can be personal (i.e., personally present) in our cognitive endeavors and yet transcend the distortions, biases, and reactive resentments of subjectivism? I think these questions can be answered on Polyanian grounds alone, but the work of Clinchy and WWK can facilitate addressing them.<sup>13</sup> Something of what I have in mind is illustrated well by the reflections on teaching and pedagogy by Esther Meek's response in this issue of *TAD*.

Seventh, Clinchy and WWK may be able to help us reflect more on and develop further Polanyi's insight (than we have heretofore) into the nature, dynamics, and transformations of the self of the knower in cognitive endeavor – i.e., the self as instrument of knowing. There has been a lot of discussion, a good deal of it confused and confusing, in recent deconstructive post-modernist accounts. I think the work of Polanyi and other thinkers with affinities to Polanyi could insightfully and fruitfully be brought to bear on these matters with Clinchy and her colleagues' help.

Eighth, Clinchy has as her primary focus, at least in these two essays, an approach to construing education and understanding education as epistemological development. Reconsidering Polanyi in light of her work has begun to open up for me a glimpse of the important ramifications of Polanyi's thought for education to which I had been largely oblivious before. Some have already begun to explore these – e.g., Parker Palmer, Peter Elbow, Elizabeth Sargent, Sam Watson, and others. But there is much more that can be done here, much much more – not least in terms of challenge to and displacement of the hegemony enjoyed by the paradigm of separate knowing.<sup>14</sup>

Ninth and lastly, almost as an aside, I want to call attention to the prominent role of anecdotes to which Clinchy has called our attention in her account of connected knowing in women – indeed, within the entire research program of the WWK project. Anecdotes, as we have all been trained to think, are not supposed to be evidence, at least not 'hard' and 'trustworthy' evidence – certainly not within the perspective of quantitative research, where separate knowing tends to hold sway. But what value do they have qua evidence in what is sometimes called a perspective of qualitative research? I think that Polanyi's thought has some interesting implications for this particular topic, particularly when we begin to consider anecdotes as clues.

There are no doubt still other valuable contributions which Clinchy and WWK may make to Polanyi studies. I hope the ones I have sketched for you will have whetted your appetite.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Blythe McVicker Clinchy, "Connected and Separate Knowing: A Marriage of Two Minds," in *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing*, edited by Nancy Goldberger, Jill Tarule, Blythe Clinchy, and Mary Belenky, (New York: Basic Books, 1996), pp. 205-247.

<sup>2</sup> First published in this volume of *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, pp. 16-32.

<sup>3</sup> The full report of the initial study by Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, including details of its methodology and field research, is given in the collaboratively authored *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986/1997).

<sup>4</sup> The study of which Clinchy's work is a part was almost exclusively of female undergraduates, not of gender differences in undergraduates. It was, however, largely in response to, and a complementary corrective to, the research of William Perry on male undergraduates (see endnote 5).

<sup>5</sup> William G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (New York: Hold, Rinehart & Winston, 1970/1999).

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1958), chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, the development of the distinction between “connected knowing” and “separate knowing” is a product of the collective work of the four authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, not just Clinchy. See pp. 100ff. However, she claims she first came up with the idea of “connected knowing” working with Claire Zimmerman, according to “Beyond Subjectivism,” p. 3. My own first encounter with the concept was in Clinchy’s “Connected and Separate Knowing: A Marriage of Two Minds” (for reference, see endnote 1).

<sup>9</sup> See *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, ch. 7, pp 131-152. There one will not find not a fully theoretically elaborated account of what “constructed knowledge” amounts to but a set of characteristics including the following: “*All knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known;*” “To see . . . that truth is a matter of the context in which it is embedded;” a readiness to “move beyond systems, putting systems to their own service;” acceptance of “responsibility for evaluating and continually reevaluating their assumptions about knowledge;” “an emphasis on a never-ending quest for truth;” etc.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Toulmin, *Introduction to Reasoning* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1997). See also Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> See endnote 7, above.

<sup>12</sup> On this topic, see my essay, “Construing Polanyi’s Tacit Knowing as Knowing by Acquaintance Rather than Knowing by Representation: Some Implications,” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 29:2 (2002-2003), 26-43.

<sup>13</sup> See *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Part II: Development in Context, and in particular, ch. 10: “Connected Teaching,” pp. 214-229. See also *Knowledge, Difference, and Power*, the entire book; e.g., Ann Stanton, “Reconfiguring Teaching and Knowing in the College Classroom,” essay 2, pp. 25-56. See my “Toward the Recovery of Common Sense in a Post Critical Intellectual Ethos,” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 19:1 (1992-93), 5-15

<sup>14</sup> See endnote 13, above.

## WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/>. In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) digital archives containing all issues of *Tradition and Discovery* since 1991; (2) a comprehensive listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) the history of Polanyi Society publications, and information on locating early publications not in the archive; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Polanyi’s thought; (5) the “Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi”, which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library; (6) photographs of Polanyi; (7) links to a number of essays by Polanyi as well as audio files for the McEnerney Lectures (1962) and Polanyi’s conversation with Carl Rogers (1966).