

# Feminist Epistemology in a Polanyian Perspective

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**ABSTRACT** Key Words: connected knowing, personal knowledge, post-critical philosophy, tacit knowing  
*In her elaboration of the distinction between connected knowing and separate knowing, Professor Clinchy addresses some conceptual relations that are central to Polanyi's epistemology. I believe Polanyi would be happy to see the strong echoes of his thoughts in feminist epistemology, and the feminists will find substantial support from Polanyi's philosophy.*

I read Professor Clinchy's two papers with great enthusiasm. I am amazed by the striking parallels between her project and Polanyi's epistemology. As a respondent, I would like to bring up the following three issues for discussion.

## Detachment and Attachment

In her effort to clarify the distinction between connected knowing and separate knowing, Professor Clinchy employs various conceptual tools. One of them is detachment and attachment. Detachment and attachment refer to two different ways that the knower treats his experience, belief or knowledge. One can either connect or distance one's self to it. In the former case, we have attachment, and in the latter we have detachment. Epistemological reflections can proceed with either attitude. By centering on detachment, we might end up with a kind of epistemology without a knowing subject, as Karl Popper advocates, while by focusing on attachment, we might have something like a theory of personal knowledge as Michael Polanyi proposes.

According to Professor Clinchy, these two epistemic attitudes correspond respectively to two ways of knowing: while detachment is typical of separate knowing, attachment is essential to connected knowing. She claims:

While separate knowing requires "self-extrication," "weeding out the self," in Elbow's terms, connected knowing requiring "self-insertion" or "projection in the good sense" (Elbow, 1973, p.149), or to use a more feminine image, "receiving the other into [the] self"(Noddings, 1984, p.30).<sup>1</sup>

Admittedly, detachment has been the predominant epistemic attitude in the academic world. Against this backdrop, the discovery of connected knowing, which features attachment by highlighting elements such as taking first-hand experience as a source of knowledge and taking self as the instrument, etc., signals the recognition of the role played by the self in the shaping of knowledge.

This is reminiscent of Polanyi's criticism of objectivism and his theory of personal knowledge. The central thesis of objectivism is the ideal of scientific detachment, which sets the goal of absolute, complete objectivity for science and characterizes science as impersonal knowledge. Since 17<sup>th</sup> century, this objective, impersonal ideal of scientific detachment has been ingrained into common sense and has become the dominant

view of science and knowledge. However, Polanyi takes the complete and absolute objectivity usually attributed to science as a delusion and rejects it ruthlessly as a false ideal. The substitute that he proposes for the ideal of scientific detachment is personal knowledge. In his view, the personal participation of the knower is no mere imperfection that should be eliminated as much as possible as objectivism argues, rather it is part and parcel to the shaping of scientific knowledge.

However, to emphasize the importance of the attachment of the knower to his or her experience, belief and knowledge is by no means to subjectivize knowledge. Professor Clinchy takes pains to distinguish subjectivism and connected knowing in various ways. In my judgment, this is an important and necessary step to take if this line of thought is to be viewed as epistemologically fertile. Here I do not intend to go into all the details of the distinction between subjectivism and connected knowing brilliantly spelled out by Clinchy; rather I would like to highlight one aspect of subjectivism which is extremely important in an epistemological point of view. A subjectivist may happen to hold a set of beliefs and stick to it. It is valid only for him/her. Subjectivism thus understood is closely related to relativism or multiplism so long as one claims that all opinions are equally valid and everyone's opinion is right for him/her. "Subjectivists are unmitigated relativists."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, connected knowing does not imply relativism.

Clinchy's effort to distance connected knowing from subjectivism parallels Polanyi's distinction between "the subjective" and "the personal." In my view, this distinction constitutes the backbone of *Personal Knowledge* and is one of the great contributions made by Polanyi to the discussion of the problem of human knowledge. While what is subjective is defined as being private, idiosyncratic, that is, valid only for the subject himself/herself, personal participation "is a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality."<sup>3</sup> That is to say, personal knowledge is a fusion of the personal and the universal, the objective. In order to cast Polanyi's position in sharp relief, it is worth noting that three conceptions of objectivity are involved here. Objectivity 1 denotes the mind-independence of the external reality, objectivity 2 refers to universal validity, objectivity 3 means scientific detachment, namely, the elimination of personal coefficients. Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge is against objectivity 3, something which he calls objectivism, but fully acknowledges objectivity 1 and 2. It retains the universal, objective dimension of science and shows an attempt to situate it in the context of personal involvement.

In arguing for the importance of personal participation in the shaping of knowledge, there is one more point that Polanyi, as a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, had to come to terms with, namely, the logical-psychological distinction, which Professor Clinchy, as a psychologist, does not need to bother to address. And this is an occasion where the arrogance of philosophy can be easily detected. In opposition to psychologism which reduced everything, including mathematics and logic, to psychology, philosophers such as Frege, Husserl and some Neo-Kantians, argued in late 19<sup>th</sup> century for the difference in kind between the psychological and the logical. And it was the logical that was considered to be the proper object domain of philosophy. In the same vein, people might repudiate Polanyi by claiming that his discussion of personal coefficients in the shaping of knowledge is primarily a kind of psychological investigation, not a logical analysis of human knowledge. How to respond to this accusation? There can be various ways. One could be skeptical about the legitimacy of the distinction, an approach that Thomas Kuhn seems to take. Polanyi, however, accepts the distinction as a valid one and claims that his theory of personal knowledge is a kind of logical analysis. I would not go into the details of Polanyi's argument here; and it will suffice to have a quotation to support my point. Talking about intellectual passions in science, one of the important personal coefficients that Polanyi elaborates,

Polanyi claims: “Science is regarded as objectively established in spite of its passionate origins. It should be clear by this time that I dissent from that belief; and I have now come to the point at which I want to deal explicitly with passions *in* science. I want to show that scientific passions are no mere psychological by-product but have a logical function which contributes an indispensable element to science.”<sup>4</sup> By the way, it is worth noting that, Polanyi’s discussion of intellectual passions is also quite relevant to Professor Clinchy’s elaboration on connected knowing in terms of “*Einfühlung* (empathy),” which is a combination of both the affective and the cognitive.

## Critical and Uncritical

This is another conceptual relation that Professor Clinchy uses to differentiate separate knowing and connected knowing. Separate knowers are critical; they play the doubting game. Connected knowers play the believing game and tend to eschew criticism. This reminds us of one of Polanyi’s philosophical goals, namely, post-critical philosophy, as the subtitle of *Personal Knowledge* suggests. Post-critical philosophy intends to overcome critical philosophy. In the history of Western philosophy, the term “critical philosophy” is conventionally understood as denoting Kant’s philosophy. However, Polanyi uses it in a broader sense, so that it is not just confined to Kant’s philosophy, rather it applies to a whole philosophical trend in the West in modern times which exalted doubt and critical reason on the one hand, and denigrated the uncritical elements of knowing, such as belief, tradition and authority on the other hand. Polanyi fully acknowledges the historical significance of critical philosophy, but he argues that critical philosophy’s overestimation of critical reason and its blindness to the positive role played by the uncritical elements in the shaping and holding of knowledge is untenable.

The critical and uncritical relation is most clearly shown in the relation between doubt and belief. In modern critical philosophy, the principle of universal doubt was passionately heralded, while belief was completely discredited. However, in Polanyi’s view, this is a misunderstanding of the relation between doubt and belief. His post-critical philosophy attempts to straighten out this distorted conception of these two cognitive powers. His fiduciary programme not only rehabilitates belief as a legitimate cognitive faculty, but also, by disclosing the fiduciary root of doubt, argues for the priority of belief to doubt, and of the uncritical to the critical. “No intelligence, however critical and original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, Polanyi takes a stronger position than Clinchy with respect to the relationship between doubt and belief, the critical and the uncritical.

In order to clarify his post-critical philosophy, Polanyi coined a new term, namely, “a-critical,” in addition to the widely used expressions like “critical” and “uncritical.” I also find this term in Professor Clinchy’s text when she quotes Code.<sup>6</sup> For Polanyi, this is an intentionally created term. The coinage of the term is closely related to the introduction of the tacit dimension into the discussion of the problem of human knowledge. Polanyi writes:

[S]ystematic forms of criticism can be applied only to articulate forms, which you can try out afresh again and again. We should not apply, therefore, the terms ‘critical’ or ‘uncritical’ to any process of tacit thought *by itself*; any more than we would speak of the critical or uncritical performance of a high-jump or a dance. Tacit acts are judged by other standards and are to be regarded accordingly as *a-critical*.<sup>7</sup> [italics original]

Polanyi suggests here that we reserve the terms “critical” and “uncritical” to explicit, articulate knowledge. In order to highlight that tacit knowing is different in kind from explicit knowledge, he claims that tacit knowledge is “a-critical,” which amounts to saying that tacit knowing is beyond critical and uncritical.

Frankly, I have problem with the term “a-critical”. I would argue that this is an unnecessary coinage and that it should be dismissed. Here are the reasons for my claim. Firstly, the basic intuition behind the term “a-critical” is the recognition of the uncritical, fiduciary dimension of our act of knowing. Therefore, on many occasions, “a-critical” reads just “uncritical.” If we substitute “uncritical” for “a-critical” on those occasions, I dare say, we won’t lose much. Secondly, the term “a-critical” is misleading because it obscures the fact that tacit knowing/knowledge is also subject to examination, test, improvement, etc. What Polanyi really wants to say is that the way a piece of tacit knowledge is tested, examined, or improved is different from that of a piece of explicit knowledge. For instance, it can only be examined by action, and tested once upon a time and cannot be repeated many times, etc. Therefore, when Polanyi claims that tacit knowledge is a-critical to the effect that it is beyond critical and uncritical, he is actually creating conceptual confusion. Thirdly, Polanyi’s comments on **tacit doubt** give support to my reading. If tacit knowing/knowledge were really a-critical, namely, beyond critical and uncritical, the term “tacit doubt” would be self-contradictory. In my view, Polanyi’s discovery of tacit doubt is an important contribution to epistemology. Different from explicit doubt which applies to explicit statements, tacit doubt indicates the inherent dubiety, the inarticulate hesitancy built into all kinds of heuristic attempts. On these grounds, I would suggest that we might think of dismissing the term “a-critical.” If we use it, we might conceal something important, if we don’t use it, we won’t lose anything. With the conceptual pair of “critical” and “uncritical,” we are well equipped to fulfill the mission of post-critical philosophy.

## **The Prospect: A Thick Epistemology**

After years of investigation on connected knowing, Professor Clinchy, a former separate-knowing oriented academic, now advocates a marriage of the two kinds of mind. From a Polanyian perspective, I suspect that we can probably claim more than this. We have seen that in many respects, feminist epistemology overlaps Polanyi’s epistemology. But it is worth noting that Professor Clinchy’s project falls short of one aspect which is central to Polanyi’s epistemology, namely, the tacit dimension of human knowledge. Admittedly, Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing/knowledge is regarded as his most important contribution to philosophy. In my view, the notion of tacit knowing is rich in philosophical implications and its great theoretical potentials have not yet been fully explored. Many conceptual relations are involved in the notion of tacit knowing, I cannot cover all of them here, let me just focus on the most obvious one. Taken literally, the term tacit has to do with the articulation or expression of human knowledge. In this regard, the target of attack of the theory of tacit knowing is the propositionally oriented understanding of knowledge of traditional epistemology, or in Polanyi’s terminology, the ideal of wholly explicit knowledge. The theory of tacit knowing claims 1) the existence of tacit knowledge, 2) the primacy of the tacit over the explicit, 3) the dynamics of the tacit and the explicit. In this perspective, the inadequacy of the propositionally oriented conception of knowledge of traditional epistemology consists, among others, in its reluctance to recognize the legitimacy of tacit knowledge, in its failing to see the tacit root of explicit knowledge, and consequently in its blindness to the rich dynamics between the explicit and the tacit in human knowledge, thus it inevitably narrows down the scope of epistemology and meanwhile only scratches the surface of the problem of human knowledge. Inspired by Clifford Geertz and Gilbert Ryle, I suggest dubbing the traditional propositionally-oriented understanding

of knowledge a “thin” conception of knowledge and would argue that the theory of tacit knowing implies a “thick” conception of knowledge. If we appeal to the old metaphor of an iceberg, we might be justified to say that the traditional thin epistemology is primarily concerned with what is above the sea, while the thick epistemology must not only dive under the sea but also take the whole iceberg into account. No doubt, this is a more complicated and more challenging task, but I am sure that it will also prove to be a more fruitful approach. And I believe, a thick epistemology adumbrated above is the prospect envisioned by Polanyi.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Blythe McVicker Clinchy, “Connected and Separate Knowing: Towards 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), 205-247, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> Clinchy, “Connected and Separate Knowing,” 215.

<sup>3</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, (London: Routledge, 1958), vii.

<sup>4</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 134.

<sup>5</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 266.

<sup>6</sup> Clinchy, “Connected and Separate Knowing,” 213.

<sup>7</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 264.

## Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. MLA or APA style are preferred. Because the journal serves English writers across the world, we do not require anybody’s “standard English.” Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered. Consistency and clear writing are expected. Manuscripts normally will be sent out for blind review. Authors are expected to provide an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment.

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