

# A Serendipitous Convergence: Blythe Clinchy and Michael Polanyi

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**ABSTRACT** Key Words: Blythe Clinchy, Michael Polanyi, Women's Ways of Knowing, epistemology, feminist epistemology, connected knowing, separate knowing, tacit knowing.

*This brief essay summarizes the content of the current issue of Tradition and Discovery which is devoted to a symposium on similarities between and relevance to each other of the work of Blythe Clinchy, one of the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing, and the work of Michael Polanyi. The background of Women's Ways of Knowing is sketched for readers without independent familiarity with it.*

This issue of *Tradition and Discovery* is devoted to an encounter between the work of Michael Polanyi and the work of Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Professor Emerita of Developmental Psychology at Wellesley College and a principal author/researcher of the influential volume, *Women's Ways of Knowing* and its sequel, *Knowledge, Difference and Power*. Early versions of the articles contained in this issue were presented at a special session of the November 2006 meeting of the Polanyi Society in Washington, DC. Discussion at that symposium was lively, convivial, and full of interesting intimations of new lines of creative thought – fraught with an indeterminate range of future manifestations, as Polanyi would say, his characteristic criterion of reality, truth, and profound meaning. I think it is not an exaggeration to speak of the encounter as historic, for here was publicly taking place a confluence of two independent but profoundly convergent streams of significant contemporary thought, each discovering and beginning to explore the other, each fascinated with the realization that the other has been mining something of the same rich seam of gold from quite different passageways, and each enthused with the mutually fructifying possibilities of joining efforts. I predict that the encounter will have significant consequences for the legacies of both Clinchy and Polanyi. This issue of *Tradition and Discovery* will enable readers to witness the encounter, appropriate its significance, and carry on its impact, each in her or his own way.

I speak of the work of Blythe Clinchy, but it is misleading to speak of her work in independence from her research colleagues and co-authors responsible for *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986, 1997): Mary Belenky, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, and the many authors represented in *Knowledge, Difference, and Power* (1996), whose work has been inspired by the former volume. The first book is remarkable in itself as having been a joint project of the four authors from conception to finish and being itself an example at its best of the informal, commonsense ways of knowing grounded in convivial personal relationships<sup>1</sup> that they discovered among women. At an early stage of their work they called it “pajama-party model scholarship.” Given this history, it is not strange that Clinchy's work continues to speak out of, exemplify, and represent “women's ways of knowing” as a project, as a field of scholarship, and as a movement.

Beginning with a tacit, largely inchoate recognition that the informal procedures to which women appeared to resort spontaneously in coming to know and understand things somehow differed from the standard academic model of critical scholarship, the four authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* constructed

an extensive qualitative research program to give an empirical basis for and a theoretical conception of just what it was that they had respectively intuited. Representatives of the standard model often characterized and caricatured it as expressions of uncritical subjectivity or subjectivism, but these four authors suspected there was something different going on. Their disciplinary background was primarily developmental psychology of the sort found in Jean Piaget, which involves significant overlap between psychology and philosophy, particularly Kantian philosophy. That tradition of research does not psychologize norms and criteria of critical judgment but seeks to trace their emergence in human development. Theoretically and methodologically, each had been strongly influenced by the work of Carol Gilligan (especially *In a Different Voice*, 1982), whose work especially in the field of moral development brought to realization how Lawrence Kohlberg's work on moral development (*The Philosophy of Moral Development*, 1981, and *The Psychology of Moral Development*, 1984) had left out of account the developmental experience of women and, in particular, the grounding of moral judgment among women, particularly, in relationships of personal caring. So also, each of these authors was strongly influenced by the work of (in some cases being graduate students under) William Perry at Harvard. Perry undertook a widely influential longitudinal study of the epistemological maturation of Harvard undergraduates (*Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*, 1970). Similar to the weaknesses of Kohlberg's work, Perry's work generalizes from the developmental experience of undergraduate males (at Harvard, no less) in coming to learn, assimilate, and put into practice the dominant academic model of critical scholarship. The four authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* appreciated the value and power of Perry's work, but became convinced that something else was going on in their observations of women in terms of women's reluctance simply to comply with the dominant model or paradigm of procedural knowing; another way of going about knowing was at work, no less reflectively critical (utilizing criteria-governed judgment), which the dominant model could not accommodate and for which the researchers had been given no prior theoretical conception. They came to call this way "connected knowing" in contrast to the "separate knowing" that is characteristic of the dominant paradigm, underscoring how it involved relationships of caring, intimacy, and empathy. In any case, following the precedent set by Perry's theory of stages of intellectual/epistemological development, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, sets out a progressive series of stages of women's intellectual/epistemological development to accommodate their empirical data: (1) silence, (2) received knowledge (listening to the voices of others), (3) subjective knowledge (the inner voice and the quest for self), (4) procedural knowledge (the voice of reason, and separate *and connected* knowing), and (5) constructed knowledge (integrating the voices).

I should say here that the four authors were not contending that women uniquely exhibit connected knowing, that men are uniquely drawn to separate knowing, that women never resort to separate knowing, or that men never resort to connected knowing. Rather, it became more and more obvious to them, at least in their research, that, as they develop intellectually, women tended spontaneously to resort to connected knowing, all the way through to the highest levels of cognitive achievement. The empirical data on women forced this recognition, whereas those, like Perry, who were primarily studying males had not noticed or had not taken into account what these researchers were coming to call connected knowing. It is not that connected knowing was not present; it was that it had somehow escaped notice and perhaps been overlooked because that research was looking for something else – namely, the emergence of traits characterizing the dominant model of knowing.

For readers familiar with Polanyi's work, it should be obvious – even without going further into explaining "connected knowing" – that something deeply resonant with Polanyi's understanding of tacit

knowing as indwelling in contrast with the objectivist paradigm of knowing is at work here. And this intuition of apparent resonance has proved true the more fully it has been explored.

I first discovered Blythe Clinchy's work about 7 years ago when I was looking for a possible supplement in feminist epistemology for a course in epistemology that I was then planning to teach. Upon reading her essay in *Knowledge, Difference, and Power*, "Connected and Separate Knowing: A Marriage of Two Minds," I was immediately struck with its deep resonance with many themes in Polanyi's writings. Not long afterwards I suggested to the Polanyi Society leadership that, in the interest of broadening awareness of and interest in Polanyi's work, we ought to invite someone involved in feminist epistemology such as Blythe Clinchy to meet with us and begin to explore possible convergences and complementarities. I also got in contact with her to inquire whether she knew of Polanyi's work and, if not, to suggest that she might find a deep commonality there. I have been happily surprised at her growing enthusiasm for Polanyi and for finding Polanyi articulating many of her own deep convictions.

We were happy to find Blythe interested and ultimately willing to make a presentation at the Polanyi Society and receive responses by three active members who knew Polanyi's work well. As I have already said, this issue of *Tradition and Discovery* is one principal result of that encounter.

To provide respondents and other persons attending the Polanyi Society meeting background in Blythe Clinchy's work, two of her articles were posted on the Polanyi website. One had already been published in *Knowledge, Difference, and Power*, the one I've already mentioned: "Connected and Separate Knowing: A Marriage of Two Minds." The other had not yet been published and, as things have turned out, is being for the first time published in this issue of *Tradition and Discovery*: "Beyond Subjectivism." Of the two, the former essay is the most fully elaborated in a theoretical way, explaining the nature of connected knowing and separate knowing, providing extensive anecdotal examples of each drawn from her research, and contending that they both belong, though she admits her hesitations about how well she has managed to "marry" them. For any reader who wishes to understand these matters at a deeper level, I particularly recommend this essay. (Readers will find that the three respondents rely heavily on that essay for a fuller theoretical understanding of connected knowing.)

"Beyond Subjectivism," the article immediately following this introduction, communicates clearly how Clinchy moves back and forth from consideration of empirical data – not numbers but anecdotal responses to interviews – to theoretical reflections. Here she argues that the ways of knowing to which undergraduate females spontaneously resort, while quite personal and personally involving, move beyond expressions of subjectivity to a serious, critical (i.e., criterion based), cognitive grappling with subject matter, first to understand it on its own terms, within its own context. While they do not conform to the dominant academic model of critical thinking – namely, "separate knowing" – they are misconceived if classified as expressions of subjectivism, i.e., uncritical expressions of subjective opinion, of which no one is more justified than another. On the contrary, Clinchy contends that they are wholly appropriate and legitimate procedures, "connected" procedures, of critical knowing (knowing governed by criteria, if only implicit),<sup>2</sup> complementary to and supplementing whatever procedures of "separate knowing" might be applied.

Subsequent to "Beyond Subjectivism" there follows three responses, one by myself, one by Esther Meek, and one by Zhenhua Yu, each of whose work is familiar to regular readers of this journal.

In my response, “How Clinchy’s Two Minds Might Become One Flesh,” I choose to approach the encounter between Blythe Clinchy’s work and that of Polanyi from two directions, each oriented by a specific question. First, I briefly venture an appreciation and interpretation of her work from a Polanyian perspective as I understand it. Behind it is my interest in the question, what relevance might Polanyi’s thought have to the project of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* and to Blythe’s work in particular? What, specifically, could a careful reading and appropriation of Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy contribute to furthering this project and this work? In particular, I suggest that any simple mapping of the distinction between connected and separate knowing onto Polanyi’s categories would be misleading, but that Polanyi’s post-critical, wholistic understanding of human knowing in its tacit and explicit dimensions affords a way of preserving the insights of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* and integrating them into a coherent comprehensive philosophical epistemology – indeed, that Clinchy’s theoretical probings have been seeking just such an understanding. Second, I briefly venture an interpretation of Polanyi’s work from the perspective opened up by Clinchy’s two essays, “Connected and Separate Knowing” and “Beyond Subjectivism.” Behind this venture is my interest in the question, what relevance have the project of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* and Clinchy’s work in particular to understanding Polanyi’s ideas? What, specifically, may her work have to contribute to Polanyi studies? Several lines of possible contributions are sketched. Among them I note that Clinchy’s work throws fresh light on the relevance of Polanyi’s understanding of human knowing to the full panoply of human relational knowing and to the transformations of the knowing self involved therein.

Esther Meek’s response, “Cultivating Connected Knowing in the Classroom,” similarly articulates an analysis and appreciation of the conception of connected knowing in relation to separate knowing from a deep grounding in Polanyi’s epistemology. While connected knowing parallels Polanyi’s tacit integrative knowing, separate knowing, Meek contends, corresponds to Polanyi’s account of destructive analysis. Both Clinchy and Polanyi together work to overcome the conceptual dichotomies that are “products of an overweening objectivist ideal.” Meek goes on at length to lay out a number of concrete suggestions regarding what teaching connected knowing looks like and what teaching in a connected way looks like, both matters of vital concern to Clinchy. In this connection Meek ventures a critical perspective on the conceptualization of “subjectivism” by Clinchy and her colleagues as not a fundamental, more or less context independent stage in the intellectual development of students, female or male, but as the product of the cultural dominance of, and reaction to, an objectivist, scientific theory of knowledge (what she calls the *Zeitgeist*). At the least, this poses an interesting issue to explore further.

Zhenhua Yu’s response, “Feminist Epistemology in Polanyian Perspective,” in a simple yet elegant way brings out the striking parallels that may be found between Clinchy’s understanding of human knowing and Polanyi’s understanding of human knowing, specifically under three themes: the contrast between detachment and attachment, the contrast between critical and uncritical, and the prospects for what he calls a “thick epistemology”—an insightful metaphoric allusion to Clifford Geertz’s proposal that field anthropologists undertake “thick descriptions” of the cultures they study—that takes into account tacit as well as explicit dimensions. More than a marriage of two minds, Yu contends that Polanyi rethinks the relationship between tacit and explicit knowing, bringing out the tacit dimension of explicit knowing (and the primacy of the former) and the dynamics of tacit and explicit knowing – countering the propositionally oriented epistemological tradition. In connection with the second theme, Yu makes a controversial proposal to Polanyi scholars that Polanyi’s category of “a-critical” be abandoned.

Following the three responses is Blythe Clinchy's reworking of her presentation to the Polanyi Society, "Pursued by Polanyi" (which there also followed the three responses), which again illustrates how grounded her thinking is in empathetic relationships with her interviewees. This differs from much of the sort of thing that appears in the pages of *Tradition and Discovery* for that very reason, but is a welcome anchoring in concrete experience of what tends often to be pretty abstract theory. It tells a delightful story of Clinchy's personal discovery and appropriation of Polanyi's insights, demonstrating again how powerfully relevant they are to the recovery of oneself as teacher, scholar, and intellectual in a post-critical intellectual ethos – yet with different nuances than readers may be familiar as she relates them to sorting through research issues in developmental psychology, applies them to the struggles of undergraduate students to assimilate course content, and uses them to illuminate creative intellectual work more broadly. You can follow how she attempts to correlate her conceptions of connected and separate knowing with Polanyi's conceptions of tacit knowing, explicit knowing, and personal knowing, and discovers that there is no simple correlation. But the non-fit leads not to frustration but a multiplication of insights into both the former and the latter, rendering her conceptions of connected and separate knowing much more complex, fruitfully complex, than they were before. Worth remarking is a possible criticism of Polanyi raised by Clinchy with regard to her own treatment of commitment, which itself has been developed through her progressive understanding of Polanyi's conception of commitment, but, as in a good dialectic, this difference leads her to further insight. Polanyi's discussion of commitment in *Personal Knowledge* at times makes it seem like all personal knowing involves some sort of unreserved commitment, particularly in its result, whereas she finds example after example of personal indwelling that is tentative, hesitant, and exploratory in its quest for understanding. That doesn't mean that there is no irreversible self-involvement at work, but it does mean that there are varieties of commitment, possibly several dimensions of commitment, and more insights into the evolution of commitment, in personal knowing that deserve acknowledgement. A second criticism Clinchy raises is of Polanyi's own conception of "what is subjective as opposed to what is personal": she sees the former as more fraught with positive potential to develop while Polanyi seems to regard it as merely negative. Another interesting question she raises pertains to the relative absence in Polanyi of an explicit discussion of *love* in connection with knowing, despite his strong reliance upon Augustine's theory of knowledge and his emphasis on passionate involvement in the knowing quest. Overall, I am left after reading "Pursued by Polanyi" with a rekindled love for *connected* teaching, as Clinchy puts it.

Concluding the symposium, the last word is given to Blythe by way of a response to the responses.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> What they describe of their work reminds me much of Drusilla Scott's account of Polanyi's philosophy in *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi*.

<sup>2</sup> I have to acknowledge that Clinchy is uncomfortable with my post-critical use of "critical" here. I think she would prefer use of "reflective," or some alternative word or phrase that would imply deliberation, effort, and skill.

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