

Unpacking the Tacit

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ABSTRACT

In Understanding the Tacit, Stephen Turner contends that 1) neo-Kantian frameworks, understood as identical (tacit) possessions collectively shared, do not exist and 2) in communicating with a person from another perspective, a speaker is not making explicit one's tacit knowledge, but rather improvising an articulation relative to a given context. Turner establishes the first point in convincing fashion. However, he does not allow for the possibility of similar tacit knowledge that is in some sense "shared." While Turner has positive things to say about the embodied nature of tacit knowledge, other contentions seem to undermine the crucial nature of embodiment. Turner is also correct on his second point, though he could have strengthened his argument by recognizing Polanyian implications and insights on the difficulty or impossibility of making the tacit explicit.

The tacit has long occupied philosopher Stephen Turner. Author of the 1994 monograph, *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge, and Presuppositions*, he has also considered the topic in several articles over the years. In *Understanding the Tacit*, Turner returns to the topic with a new monograph. In his introductory chapter, he helpfully outlines the history of what Michael Polanyi designated as "tacit knowledge" by Western philosophy. In so doing, Turner honors Polanyi and those in Polanyi's tradition who struggle to make sense of this tacit dimension.

A major focus of the book concerns what happens when humans understand one another through language. Davidson's thought on translating languages constitutes a starting point for Turner. While translation is underdetermined in the sense that no one definitive translation exists (there is no one-to-one correspondence between languages), translations typically allow human beings with different native tongues to understand one another (42). For Davidson, this entails that speakers of one language do not possess wholly incommensurable conceptual schemes; however, neither do humans share a common conceptual scheme. Indeed, the neo-Kantian notion of common conceptual schemes is precisely the problem.

Turner follows Davidson in thorough-going fashion by rejecting frameworks, structures, systems, worldviews, traditions, presuppositions, paradigms, etc., in the sense of social or collective possessions that are the same for those supposedly sharing them. Thus, whatever tacit knowledge regarding a concept or

a practice might be, it is not a same something held in common by different individuals. The notion “that the same practices, presuppositions, and the like get into the heads of many people requires a means of transmission that is little short of magical” (69). Rather individuals acquire, adjust, and adjust to concepts, practices, skills, and habits through interaction with other human beings. Experience and learning always involve both normative and informational content, so we need no neo-Kantian “spookiness” to account for the normative (131-35). All of this has ramifications for the tacit dimension: when persons need to “unpack” something another fails to understand, they are not rendering explicit the tacit knowledge they possess, but rather improvising to make the matter at hand intelligible to one’s interlocutor. In this vein, Turner criticizes Charles Taylor for alleged misunderstanding of the tacit, claiming that Taylor mistakenly believes that “when articulating tacit presuppositions we are reading off something that actually is present in the tacit realm, ready to be read off” (7).

Turner does make a convincing case for the untenability of any neo-Kantian version of genuinely collective conceptual and practical possessions. No “causally autonomous” or “different collective dimension” obtains (69). The wrong-headedness of such neo-Kantian theories keeps coming up chapter after chapter. Putting a positive spin on this, one can rightly say that Turner thoroughly discredits the neo-Kantian ethos. Less charitably, some might feel, after a while, that he is beating a dead horse.

If forced to choose between locating concepts, practices, and skills in “the social” in the sense of a collective or “supraindividual place” or, instead, in the individual or “nonsocial,” Turner correctly places Polanyi in the latter category (67-68). Yet I judge that Turner forces this either-or and misses a possible *tertium quid*. He insists that for people to truly “share” a framework, the framework must be exactly the same for all sharers. Either all is shared or nothing is shared. This entails that the means of transmitting or acquiring a framework “must be error free,” which is obviously not the case (69). Though we might like to think that cases of tacit knowledge involve something “fixed and stable” (6), which for Turner entails sameness of tacit knowledge among individuals speaking a language or engaging in a practice, such hope is illusory.

As an alternative to collective sameness versus individual variations, I would suggest the possibility of *similar* tacit knowledge among individuals sharing a skill, practice, language, or tradition. In the course of this review, I will address this possibility of similar tacit knowledge in terms of physical embodiment, language—which I will claim relies upon our embodiment substantively, not merely instrumentally—and broader conceptual schemes, including worldviews.

Turner sometimes focuses on embodied knowledge in the sense of somatic knowledge (for example, 14), though he does not regard this as fundamentally different from linguistic knowledge relative to the tacit (a non-fundamental difference may be that one would be less likely in general to attempt to explicate somatic knowledge or to explicate a physical performance through language [58-60, 204]). Turner, in keeping with his antipathy to “sameness,” declares that “throwing a curveball, for example, is individual in a complex way,” given the “different physical characteristics” of people (14). However, if we take the examples of simply throwing a ball overhand in the proper way for baseball or Polanyi’s example of riding a bicycle, which Turner refers to several times (59, 98, 191, 204), my intuition is that something similar occurs with regard to the tacit knowledge involved for almost all humans. The basic similarity of most human bodies constitutes the basis for my hunch that most people are employing similar physical techniques in balancing on a bike or successfully throwing overhand.

I have acknowledged a relative distinction between somatic knowledge as in a physical performance versus linguistic knowledge, though I affirm that all knowledge ultimately is embodied knowledge. In this acknowledgement and affirmation, I concur with Michael Polanyi. While Polanyi notes that “our body

is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge,” our body is not merely instrumental but also substantive (*TD*, 15). Polanyi makes “a wider generalization of the feeling we have of our body” beyond the somatic: “when we make a thing function as the proximal term of tacit knowing, we incorporate it into our body—or extend our body to include it—so that we come to dwell in it” (*TD*, 15-16). Turner expresses openness to the notion of the embodied nature of all knowledge in his opening list of how adequately to account for the tacit: “Acknowledge that much of what is discussed as tacit is embodied: Perhaps all of it should be understood in this way” (2). Also, he refers to Michael Oakeshott’s thought on practice, apparently approvingly: “All experience is, so to speak, experience through one’s abilitied body” (135). Yet he also writes in ways that downplay the crucial nature of embodiment. He tends to locate social practices and the tacit in individual “brains” rather than “bodies” (for example, 68, 74). Mary Midgley has commented on this tendency among some scholars:

What is ironic, however, about this ostensible rejection of ‘dualism’ by most contemporary philosophers of mind, is the persistence in their thinking of shades of the Enlightenment ghost they thought they had routed. For, when they discourse about the “mind/body” relation they rarely consider anything in that “body” below the level of the neck. Either they focus exclusively on the mind’s relation to the brain, or more generally, on its relation to the physical world *tout court*. Flesh and bones (and, unsurprisingly, women’s minds) are still relatively neglected subjects in the field (Midgley, 66-67).

Additionally, Turner’s handling of Harry Collins on somatic knowledge misses an opportunity to affirm the radicalness of our embodiment. Collins offers the thought experiment of riding a bicycle on an asteroid “with almost zero gravity,” concluding that in such an environment we could “probably” make fully explicit the rules for balancing the bicycle (Collins, 110). Collins further concludes that we could make rules for balancing a bicycle on earth explicit, if only our brains were faster (Turner, 59). From a Polanyian perspective, though, it would seem that a key aspect of the speed of our brains—and bodies—is precisely that they holistically process information through our tacitly attending from subsidiary elements to a focal object. As Mark Johnson and George Lakoff put it, “most of our thought is unconscious in the sense that it operates below the level of cognitive awareness, inaccessible to consciousness and working too quickly to be focused on” (Johnson and Lakoff, 10). By way of contrast, a computer, however fast, needs information to be explicit in order to process it. Turner criticizes Collins for applying different standards for whether knowledge can be made explicit to somatic knowledge, on the one hand, and social knowledge by a machine or computer, on the other (64).¹ However, he never directly challenges Collins’ model wherein somatic knowledge is not “irreducibly tacit,” but instead “based on a mechanical string-transformation type process” (Turner, 60).

I believe that there are aspects of our embodiment that are so basic, so radical, that they defy any explicitation. “Radical” means that our embodiment is the root of all knowledge and meaning, including linguistic meaning. All language builds upon the base of—radically and tacitly relies upon—our bodily being in the world, upon our seeing, hearing, smelling, tactile, motile, and sexual bodies. The very nature, structure, and logic of human conceptual systems are rooted in our embodiment. As William Poteat put it, “language is structured *upon* and therefore structured *like* our sentiently oriented and motile mindbodies” (Poteat, 187-88). Johnson and Lakoff refer to non-propositional embodied schemas, upon which the very intelligibility of language depends and some of which I believe defy explicitation. These schemas arise from our perceptual interactions with the world, bodily movements, and manipulation of objects (Johnson, 29). Such schemas contrast with body image, which is relatively external and more amenable to explicitation. When Turner writes of schemes, frameworks, or the like, he engages conceptual or propositional ones, ones amenable to significant externalization. Yet behind or below such frameworks are tacit bodily schemas upon which they rely for their meaning, for their ability to be understood.

Mirror neurons offer a new dimension to the embodied nature of knowledge, and Turner does commendably bring them into his discussion. He notes that “the mechanism of mirror neurons doesn’t operate on anything collective or tacit, but rather on what someone can see or hear—paradigmatically physical movements” (75). Though we do not know how extensive human reliance on mirror neurons actually is beyond physical movements and imitative behavior of infants, such as crying upon hearing another baby cry, Turner ends up putting a lot of weight on them for our development of skills and for our communication with others. Given his contention that we do not “share” tacit knowledge with others, mutual understanding depends upon social interaction and “mirror neurons” which “are already, implicitly,” psychological or neuroscientific “facts about social interaction” (169). We use our individual knowledge, including our individual tacit knowledge, “on the fly” as we give the explicit information we guess will enable another to understand (Turner, 153 and 168). This neglects the *similar* perceptual, kinesthetic, and emotional tacit bodily “schema” I believe we do in some sense “share” with our fellow human beings. Furthermore, as suggested by Turner’s identification of mirror neurons as mechanism, his model of our embodied understanding of others may be too mechanistic. As Turner recognizes, mirror neurons allow the imitation or copying of others’ movements but in themselves tell us nothing of the meaning of a movement to another (75-76). In contrast, bodily schemas would give us some knowledge of what something means for others.

Moreover, far-flung extension and manipulation of bodily schemas appear to underlie linguistic syntax. Harry Hunt cites psychological experiments supporting the theory that gesture is a key stage of the organization of sentences, externalizing their otherwise implicit spatial design (Hunt, 154-56). Lakoff has categorized examples of this dependence of syntax on bodily semantics involving physical and spatial relationships, including the following: 1) “Hierarchical syntactic structure (i.e., constituent structure) is characterized by part-whole schemas,” 2) “Grammatical relations and coreference relations are represented structurally by link schemas,” and 3) “Syntactic categories, like other categories, are characterized structurally by container [in-out] schemas” (Lakoff, 290). For a fluent native speaker, it would seem that tacit knowledge of rather complex syntactical “rules” obtains. At least, attempting to formally diagram a sentence grammatically can be very complicated. To travel part of the way with Turner, the process of learning one’s native tongue is undoubtedly different for every child. Nevertheless, I find it plausible that similar tacit syntactical processes occur among most fluent native speakers once they have learned their language’s syntax.

If I am correct about bodily schemas and the embodied nature of language, these then seem to support the similarity though not sameness of tacit knowledge mentioned above. Regarding learning and understanding concepts, Turner writes that “‘sameness’ in this case is sameness only at the level of functional intersubjective understanding—not a neural fact, much less one produced by common body experiences” (117). I have contended, however, that we do have similar body experiences. While we do not have exactly the same perceptual, motile, or emotional abilities or capacities, our embodied experiences are sufficiently similar to enable transmission and mutual understanding. We can consider an outlying case of someone whose embodiment is very different from most in a key aspect, for instance, the case of a congenitally blind person. This person derives some meaning from others’ use of color terminology and is usually able to use color terminology correctly. Such making sense of color terminology by blind persons tacitly relies upon some analogy with the embodied perceptions of which they are capable, perceptions and other embodied experiences they share with sighted individuals. This is to say, that even in a case of major dissimilarity, enough similarity of bodily experiences pertains to enable understanding.

Thus far I have dealt mostly with the bodily bases of meaning, in the senses of somatic knowledge and of basic understanding of language, of words. Now I will focus on larger frameworks of meaning that involve tacit assumptions and understandings. The shared meanings of a group or culture may be referred

to by various terms such as framework, tradition, ethic, or worldview. I would stipulate that each version of a worldview held by a member of a culture will be somewhat different from everyone else's version. This accords with Turner's insistence on the "different tacit backgrounds" of individuals. Think of all the learning, all the experiences, that a person has in growing up and appropriating a worldview. Most of what underlies or constitutes this worldview is tacit at any given moment. Thus, the tacit knowledge of individuals sharing a worldview will not be the same. When persons draw upon that tacit knowledge in making an assessment or taking an action, they will draw upon tacit knowledge that is not exactly the same as another individual in the same situation, because of their different backgrounds. Additionally, as a person has new experiences drawing on a worldview, one's version of that worldview with its tacit knowledge will change at least slightly. Indeed, this comment connects with Turner's dilemma concerning Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*: making it too powerful, humans become automata, while "allow(ing) too much improvisation renders it powerless" (11). Polanyi indicated that the transmission of a scientific or any human tradition, which itself always involves interpretations beyond mere facts, involves further interpretation that modifies the tradition in light of present concerns, if only slightly (*PK*, 160). As with native speakers of a language understanding one another, what is required is not sameness of tacit knowledge, but enough similarity to understand and acknowledge one another as sharing a worldview or tradition. Of course, beyond the on-going activity of current interpretation, traditions are always contested to a greater or lesser extent. This is precisely what we should expect if each person's version of a tradition or worldview is somewhat different from everyone else's.

However, my strong concurrence with Turner in rejecting the sameness of worldviews among those within a tradition does not require the rejection of significant similarities in worldviews. I began this review by noting Turner's unequivocal opposition to neo-Kantian frameworks or schemes, which neo-Kantians take to be as universal as Kant's categories of space, time, substance, and causality in constraining our engagement with the world. This opposition leads Turner to ignore what I believe is an undeniable reality: that linguistic concepts and worldviews can significantly constrain our perception and thinking, making certain interpretations unlikely if not impossible, while making other interpretations very likely if not inevitable.

Color offers an example of how language can in certain particulars constrain perception/interpretation, despite the reality of "pan-human perception universals." Regarding said universals, Berlin and Kay identified eleven basic color categories. Eleanor Rosch studied a tribe (the Dani of New Guinea) virtually devoid of color terminology. She found the central members of these basic color categories to be "perceptually more salient," readily learnable, and more easily remembered, with very similar structures of color memory for both the tribespeople and English speakers (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 168-69). Subsequently, researchers have corroborated these findings with speakers of 110 non-literate languages (Regier et al.). Thus, the similarity of basic human perception suggested earlier finds additional support. Nevertheless, an experiment concluded that Russians, who do not have a word equivalent to the English "blue," but rather two distinct words for "dark blue" and "light blue," more quickly distinguish between shades of blue than do English speakers (Boroditsky).

The intricacies of Trinitarian theology exemplify how language can constrain abstract thinking, including thinking deeply implicated in worldviews. The Greek formula of three hypostases in one *ousia* and the Latin formula of three *personae* in one substance happened to be just the opposite regarding which coefficient is the more concrete and individual versus which is the more abstract and general. This led Eastern Orthodox theology to regard the three divine manifestations as the more concrete and Roman Catholicism the one God as more concrete. Thus the danger to avoid for Orthodox theology was tritheism, while that to avoid for Catholicism was unitarianism; thus the ultimate source of divinity was the Father (*o theos*) for Orthodoxy and the Godhead for Catholicism. These alternative ways of viewing the divine

led to disagreement on the procession of persons within the Trinity, which formed the theological basis for the split between West and East in 1082 C.E., as the Pope excommunicated Orthodox believers for their “heresy.”

Polanyi famously employs the example of the Zande practice of divination via administering poison to chickens to show how well protected from challenge a worldview can be. Each worldview or tradition involves a thick network of tacit interconnections—or I might even say a thicket of tacit interconnections, wherein wholes are greater than the sum of their parts. This systemic thickness helps explain the resistance of a worldview or framework to challenges. In the case of the Azande, they have multiple explanations for apparent problems with the practice raised by modern science and medicine (*PK*, 287-94).

In overlooking the holistic nature of tacit knowing, Turner appears to ignore another aspect of Polanyi’s thought, an aspect alluded to earlier. Polanyi emphasized the “from-to” nature of knowledge, which entails a distinction between subsidiary and focal awareness. As we come to know, as we act, we attend from subsidiary meanings—partial meanings or clues—to the focal or holistic meaning, the meaning of a whole, of a “comprehensive entity.” This from-to nature of knowing means that knowledge of the totality of what might become explicit—the sum of the parts—is *not* the same as the comprehensive meaning of a complex whole; the articulated focal meaning of a part is not the same as that part’s tacit meaning. As Polanyi puts it, “subsidiary awareness and focal awareness are mutually exclusive” (*PK*, 56). Indeed, if we fail to realize this Gestalt-like nature of knowing, we are guaranteed to miss the wider meaning of things, according to a Polanyian perspective. Strikingly, Polanyi notes the problems attendant upon focusing on particulars in performance or action. One example is how a pianist can lose the music “by concentrating attention on his fingers” (*TD*, 18).

For Polanyi, however, the irreducibility of whole to parts extends beyond the performative to all tacit knowing, including that involving language, from discerning the connotations of an individual word in a particular practical context to holding a worldview. While important elements of a worldview can achieve articulation, Polanyi’s recognition of the holistic from-to nature of knowledge raises a caveat. When we isolate aspects of a worldview that contribute to the whole of that worldview, we thus attend to or focus on elements that are usually subsidiary. However, the meaning of these particulars when we access them in isolation is *not* the same as their joint meaning in the whole for Polanyi. Applying this phenomenon to tradition, to analytically dissect particular components of a tradition risks alienating one from its wider integrated meaning. The economy of grace or “the gift” might provide one such example. Deconstructing “the gift,” Jacques Derrida concludes that any expectations of the recipient by the giver must vitiate the graciousness of a gift. Yet in lived experience the following occurs: someone gives a gift in *hopes* of some kind of appreciation or reciprocity, but without any condition that the gift should be returned if this does not eventuate. Such integration within a tradition does not assume that important concepts—and their underlying primary metaphors—are always propositionally or logically consistent. All the same they may complement each other and cohere at a more tacit, prereflective, deeper level of embodiment. Noteworthy, philosopher of myth Ernst Cassirer and Polanyi independently have commented on how myth typically involves antimonies incompatible when considered separately, yet point to an import which encompasses their joint meaning—a sympathetic coherence, involving a “unity of feeling,” in Cassirer’s language (Cassirer, 81ff.; Polanyi and Prosch, 152ff). Such polarities may include the one and the many (unity/multiplicity), creation/destruction, primordial goodness/evil, and order/chaos.

To close, for the Polanyian there are many dimensions of the tacit that Turner chooses not to explore. Yet his project’s purpose was not to explore all the significant implications of Polanyi’s thought, but rather 1) to debunk neo-Kantian models that insist that something identical must be tacitly shared to enable social communication and 2) to understand what is happening when people from different perspectives

do in fact understand one another. I have already indicated that Turner succeeds on the first point, a point with which Polanyi can agree. On the second point, Turner argues that what occurs is actually not a making explicit of a speaker or writer's tacit knowledge, not the conveying of tacit knowledge per se, but rather the "constructing [of] an articulation, on the fly, that is sensitive to context" (168). I find convincing Turner's second point as well. Indeed, Polanyi can offer support for this point that Turner does not tap into, specifically relating to the difficulty or impossibility of making the tacit explicit. Given the plethora or thicket of tacit knowledge a speaker draws upon and the from-to structure of all knowing, there is no way for that speaker to even begin to accurately make explicit to a person, especially one coming from another perspective, all the tacit knowledge that she or he relies upon; the articulation forms just the tip of a mostly tacit iceberg, which must for both practical and theoretical reasons remain submerged in the sea.

ENDNOTE

¹This criticism is one move in the wider context of Turner arguing against Collins' advocacy of collective tacit knowledge.

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Embodiment and its Relation to the Tacit: Response to Nikkel

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Keywords: Embodiment, Michael Polanyi, Tacit Knowledge, Lakoff and Johnson, Andy Clark, Luria

ABSTRACT

In this response to David Nikkel's review essay on Understanding the Tacit, his suggestion that the book fails to incorporate insights from embodiment theorists is addressed. It is noted, against his appeal to the example of Lakoff's and Johnson's discussion of the bodily origins of metaphors used in reasoning, that there are problems with treating particular embodied elements as ineliminable. Also noted is the evidence of Luria's studies of reasoning among the unschooled, which suggest that syllogistic inference is learned, which raises questions about the relation of embodied knowing and these kinds of inferences. It is suggested that another kind of embodiment thinking, involving emulation, is a better way to approach higher reasoning, and by extension also the kind of specialized knowledge usually discussed as tacit knowledge by Polanyi.

I thank David Nikkel for his generous and interesting review essay on *Understanding the Tacit*, which highlights a number of important issues. Much of his commentary relates to embodiment, which is an important and muddled topic, for several reasons I will try to briefly explain. I also want to express agreement on some of his other points, such as similarity of responses. What I have tried to give, in this book and elsewhere, especially the last chapter of *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994), is an explanation of why people behave similarly, but one which does not involve a kind of hidden collective server from which they download the "same" mental contents.

There is a common theme to my reluctance to endorse certain accounts of the tacit, which relates to the use of analogies. The neo-Kantian analogy that I take to be both paradigmatic and misleading is between explicit forms of reasoning and the reasoning that is commonly attributed to the tacit realm, notably the concept of presuppositions. But the issue extends to a whole range of analogical notions, such as conventions, tacit rules, and so forth. It is convenient for us to think of there being such things as "concepts," which have a specific meaning, shared between people, and to think that there is also some