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Understanding the Tacit

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Introduction

Tacit Knowledge: Between Habit and Presupposition

The tacit, as I will treat it here, encompasses a poorly bounded domain that appears repeatedly in the history of philosophy and social and political thought, under different names with different emphases and different associations. Aristotle says that moral virtue is a *hexis* (Aristotle [350 B.C.E.] 1915: 1103a). In more recent writers it is second nature (McDowell 1994: 84), the background (Searle 1995), habit or custom (Hume [1748] 1995: 88–89), *habitus*—with different meanings in Bourdieu, where it is a collective fact (1977: 17), and Weber, where it is ascribed to individuals ([1922] 1988: 391, 532). Michael Polanyi called it tacit knowledge (1966a). Gilbert Ryle distinguished knowing how from knowing that (1949: 27–32). In its historical sense, it can refer to the climate of opinion or *Zeitgeist* of the time, and especially to the "assumptions" that are evident to later interpreters but obscured to the historical persons who think in terms of them—the historical a priori, as Dilthey put it ([1959] 1988: 51). In its sociological sense, it refers to the taken-for-granted and the distinctive but unacknowledged habits of mind or meaning-structures that make something taken for granted.

What all of these locutions refer to is the unspoken and often inarticulable conditions of thought and articulation, normally conditions that are acquired or learned other than through the kind of explicit claims normally associated with the term "knowledge." Michael Polanyi's slogans capture this thought: "All knowledge either is or is rooted in tacit knowledge"; "we know more than we can say." Wittgenstein went from saying, in the *Tractatus*, that "the tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated" ([1921] 1961: 37, para. 4.002) to his later view that justification dead-ended in facts about what we do. Regress arguments of this kind are important motivations for appealing to the tacit: Chains of justification do indeed end in something like unspoken mutual understandings. The problem is to make sense of what these understandings are, or what they themselves rest on, and what produces them.

If the problem is to make sense of what these understandings are, or what they themselves rest on, there are some obvious constraints on the solution. These are social facts. They vary from society to society and setting to setting. They underlie the differences between political orders

and the possibilities of constructing political orders. In this theoretical context, "understandings" is an awkward analogy: There is nothing like a contract or agreement. Nor does the term "understandings" capture the whole of the relevant domain. Understanding shades into skills, skills of interacting with others. If the end point is the way something is done in a group or setting, it shades into more ordinary kinds of skills: riding a bicycle, manipulating a laboratory instrument, and the like. These skills are "conditions" of certain kinds of communication and interaction as well. One cannot function in a laboratory without them or ride competently in a closely packed group of bicycle racers without possessing skills at a high level. Interactional skills and bodily skills are intertwined. So is skill and most of evaluative language, a point Wittgenstein made in his "Lecture on Aesthetics" ([1938] 1967: 1–40): Using the language requires a bit, at least, of knowing how, and using the evaluative language in a sophisticated way may require a high level of competence in performing the tasks being evaluated.

WHAT AN ACCOUNT OF THE TACIT NEEDS TO DO

Making sense of the realm of the tacit is not easy, but it is possible to specify a few desiderata for an adequate approach. The short list would include the following:

1. Explain what is going one when the tacit gets articulated or turned into something explicit.
2. Understand the fact that we stumble over the tacit, that it is usually obvious only to outsiders needs to be part of any account of the tacit. However it is described—tacit knowledge, presuppositions, techniques of the body—it must be understood in terms of the conditions under which these descriptions of the tacit are themselves made possible. Moreover, there is something comparison-relative about our constructions of the tacit. This leads to an additional problem that can be phrased as a question: What if not only the recognition of the tacit in others but the content we ascribe to the tacit in others is relative to our own tacit background and would differ for persons with different tacit backgrounds?
3. Acknowledge that much of what is discussed as tacit is embodied: Perhaps all of it should be understood in this way. But there needs to be some sort of fit between claims about the tacit and the actual physical world from which it produces its effects: with the brain and with ordinary senses, cognitive processes, and the like.
4. Square with the usual things that claims about the tacit are taken to explain: communication, mutual understanding, skills, moments of discovery in which unarticulated understanding is articulated, and

the kinds of political and social facts that accounts of the tacit, notably accounts of practice, have explained.

5. Avoid nonexplanatory shortcuts. Many of the most repeated terms in discussions of the tacit are concepts with a one-directional explanatory structure—that is to say that they are invoked as explanations, but are themselves not explainable. Notions of practice often have this character: They are treated as explainers, but are descriptions that need to be given some sort of additional explanatory background or force to actually explain. Sometimes it is assumed that they have this force, or that just by describing something as having a force one has explained it. This is an issue that cannot be addressed in detail here, although I will discuss some dimensions of it in this Introduction in connection with the next issue.
6. Explain how the tacit stuff gets there or is produced. One can call this the joint problems of transmission and sameness. If one has a picture of communication in which each party to the communication must decode the utterances of the other and can do so because they each have, so to speak, a secret decoder ring that decodes and encodes in the same way as the other party decodes and encodes, one must ask how they got that ring. If one chooses to jettison this picture and claim that the tacit is deeply private and distinctive to each person, one must account in some way for how the tacit in this sense is acquired, but also how it enables people to do what they can in fact do, such as understand one another in spite of having different tacit backgrounds.

   7. Recognize metaphors as metaphors, and analogies as analogies. Metaphorical usages, such as "frameworks," abound in this literature, usually without any sense that they need to be able to be cashed in. Similarly, terms that make sense in the context of explicit formulation, such as "rule" and "knowledge," are applied analogically to the tacit without reminding us that these are analogies only. An adequate account needs to be careful with these distinctions and not assume that the analogies are licit.
8. Be careful with the distinction between explanation and description. It is one thing to describe a practice, but quite another to treat the practice as itself something that explains anything.

OBSTACLES, DILEMMAS, AND EXPLANATORY LACUNAE

In what follows, I will briefly outline the main obstacles and conflicts that lie in the path of any account of the tacit. Most of these have the form of explanatory dilemmas, in which there are two explanatory problems that overlap and two solutions, each of which works for one part of the problem, but leads to implausibilities when it is applied to other parts.

Habits and Presuppositions

One can see the roots of the most central of these dilemmas in the history of a particular philosophical dispute, the fundamental conflict between Hume and Kant. Kant responded to Hume's idea that casual inferences could not be grounded by a principle, but only by custom or habit, that is to say inferential habits. Kantianism and neo-Kantianism responded by arguing that there were logical conditions for judgments about causality. These conditions were of course normally tacit as well: But they could be articulated. Hegel and the neo-Kantians extended this insight in a radical direction. Hegel argued that habits were already conceptual. The neo-Kantians argued that not just physics but any organized domain of thought presupposed conceptual content, which could be revealed by transcendental arguments.

These two lines of reasoning were not directly or simply opposed to one another, and developed, indeed flourished, independently, in part because they largely took different domains of thought and action as paradigmatic. Yet neither of them could quite shake the fundamental problem they faced: The transcendental side needed to connect to the real world of causality; the habit side needed to account for the fact that the things it explained seemed to be the sorts of things that could be restated as "assumptions" or premises to arguments.

The "habit" side made arguments summarized by Friedrich Hayek in his discussion of tradition, a key term in this discourse:

> [Constructivist rationalism] produced a renewed propensity to ascribe the origin of all institutions of culture to invention or design. Morals, religion and law, language and writing, money and the market, were thought of as having been deliberately constructed by somebody, or at least as owing whatever perfection they possessed to such design. . . .
>
> Yet . . . [m]any of the institutions of society which are indispensable conditions for the successful pursuit of our conscious aims are in fact the result of customs, habits or practices which have been neither invented nor are observed with any such purpose in view. . . .
>
> Man . . . is successful not because he knows why he ought to observe the rules which he does observe, or is even capable of stating all these rules in words, but because his thinking and acting are governed by rules which have by a process of selection been evolved in the society in which he lives, and which are thus the product of the experience of generations. (Hayek 1973: 10–11)

With claims like these, the muddle becomes apparent. The "rules" which are observed but not stated or even perhaps capable of being stated are a peculiar object. They are not rules at all, except in an analogical sense, analogous to explicit or non-tacit rules. But sometimes, it seems, they can

be stated. Genealogically they arise through means that are not conscious. They are not invented, although things that were invented, such as explicit doctrines or norms, can become habitualized, and thus tacit.[1] But the crucial point is this: When we attempt to explain or articulate them we do *so as though* they were invented or as though there was an explicit rule or presupposition hidden somewhere which we were revealing by stating it explicitly. So these "customs, habits, or practices" behave like the kinds of things that evolve through a "process of selection" involving experience, but are otherwise like rules invented by people.

The "transcendental" side has its own problems that are the mirror image of this one: the problem of relating to the causal world (Beiser 2009). But it has a powerful "method." By asking for justifications of something that is done or claimed but which is normally not justified, one can create a novel question for which an answer can be supplied in the form of an explicit premise, rule, or concept. But this method is too powerful, because it manufactures too many presuppositions and rules, and too many that conflict with one another. Attributing "presuppositions" is done very casually in the philosophical literature. Several examples are given in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. This complicates the problem of connecting to the natural world: If we are to understand these presuppositions as representing something that actually happens in the minds of people, we have no grounds within these regress arguments themselves for thinking that we have the right presupposition. And this raises questions about what sorts of things these presuppositions are supposed to be.

Presuppositions or Enthymemes?

In the technical literature on the transcendental method, mere regress arguments, which may result in varying and conflicting attributions of presuppositions, are distinguished from transcendental arguments that not only end the regress but exclude all alternatives (Paulson [1934] 1992). It is questionable whether there are such arguments. The neo-Kantians never arrived at them. For reasons familiar from Quine, we know that for whatever set of premises we derive a set of sentences from, a conflicting set of premises can be constructed from which the original set of premises may also be derived. And this is more or less what happened with neo-Kantianism: Philosophers invented system upon system to conceptually order and explain such domains as the law. The systems conflicted and thus undermined their own claim for themselves, which was that the premises were "necessary."

This result should be a warning for appeals to "presuppositions" generally. The issue is connected with the problem of whether the content of the tacit we ascribe to others will vary according to our own tacit background. Here it is useful to distinguish two distinct things: presuppositions and enthymemes, or inferences with "suppressed premises." In the case of enthymemes, we are encountering an inference that someone is making that

we would not make or would not make unless we knew something else, something that would enable us to accept the inference. If we are attempting to understand someone who is reasoning in a way we find unfamiliar or wrong, we are able, routinely, to makes sense of the other person by supplying this something in the form of a premise that would make the inference valid or enable us to explain it as an intelligible error, an error of the kind we already would be able to understand.

These somethings have a different character than what we usually have in mind when speaking of presuppositions: They are supplied or constructed for a specific purpose, and they are relative to the starting point of the person who is using them to understand someone else. Moreover, there are going to be many inferential bridges that will work to make the inference valid, so there is underdetermination. Moreover, what is an enthymeme for me is not necessarily one for you. Indeed, in the normal situation, one is ascribing a missing premise in order to understand a person who is already making the inference for which the "missing" premise is being supplied.

In the case of tacit knowledge, we would like to think that there is something fixed or stable to which the term refers. Presuppositions, understood in a more or less Kantian way, have this stability. But it is questionable whether there are such things, that they are in fact stable, or that they exist at all. And these questions are linked to the problem of their accessibility, at least in the "necessary" sense. If they are inaccessible to us, as analysts, in this fixed form, how could they be accessible to those who are supposed to share them? How could they be transmitted tacitly if they could not be accessed explicitly? What grounds could we have for saying some fixed thing of this kind is shared?

Explanatory Lacunae

These questions point to a set of muddles over explanation. They become especially apparent in the writings of Charles Taylor. As he is normally interpreted, he is an advocate of tacit knowledge, and part of a long tradition:

> Following Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Michael Polanyi, and Wittgenstein, Taylor argues that it is mistaken to presuppose that our understanding of the world is primarily mediated by representations. It is only against an unarticulated background that representations can make sense to us. On occasion we do follow rules by explicitly representing them to ourselves, but Taylor reminds us that rules do not contain the principles of their own application: application requires that we draw on an unarticulated understanding or "sense of things"—the background. (*Wikipedia* n.d.)

And he is understood as interpreting Wittgenstein in accordance with this picture:

> Taylor argues that Wittgenstein's solution is that all interpretation of rules draws upon a tacit background. This background is not more rules or premises, but what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." More specifically, Wittgenstein says in the *Philosophical Investigations* that "Obeying a rule is a practice." Taylor situates the interpretation of rules within the practices that are incorporated into our bodies in the form of habits, dispositions, and tendencies. (*Wikipedia* n.d.)

But when it comes to the problem of what is going on when we articulate rules, Taylor falls into the same problem as Hayek, although in a slightly different way.

Taylor explains himself in terms of "frameworks." This is a metaphor, and a cliché. But Taylor treats frameworks as genuine explanations, which explain what happens when we make the tacit explicit:

> Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgments, intuitions, or reactions. . . . To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses. That is, when we try to spell out what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain manner, we find ourselves articulating inter alia what I have been calling here "frameworks." (Taylor 1989: 26)

This is a straightforward appeal to presuppositions and a claim that when we explain ourselves to others, we are articulating a framework that is already there, providing the background to our moral responses. The picture is clear: When articulating tacit presuppositions we are reading off something that actually is present in the tacit realm, ready to be read off. "Presuppose" is not used analogically, or in an "as if" form, but to state some sort of fact.

One might ask what evidence Taylor has for the existence of frameworks of this sort, and indeed, he raises the question himself by his criticisms of the denial of frameworks by unnamed "naturalists." His answer to the naturalists seems to be that they are an explanatory necessity. Frameworks need to be there for things to have meaning for us: The "framework-definitions are answers, providing the horizon within which we know where we stand, and what meanings things have for us" (Taylor 1989: 29).

Taylor acknowledges that some frameworks cannot be articulated. But he treats this as a property of the frameworks themselves.

> Plato's ethic requires what we might call today a theory, a reasoned account of what human life is about, and why one way is higher than the others. This flows inescapably from the new moral status of reason. But the framework within which we act and judge doesn't need to be

> articulated theoretically. It isn't, usually, by those who live by the warrior ethic. They share certain discriminations: what is honorable and dishonoring, what is admirable, what is done and not done. It has often been remarked that to be a gentleman is to know how to behave without ever being told the rules. (And the "gentlemen" here are the heirs of the former warrior nobility.) (Taylor 1989: 20–21)

He notes, "In the case of some frameworks it may be optional whether one formulates them or not. But in other cases, the nature of the framework demands it, as with Plato, or seems to forbid it, as with the warrior-citizen ethic he attacked: this does seem to be refractory to theoretical formulation." He goes on to suggest that we can sometimes articulate, and sometimes need to articulate, frameworks, for example to show how an inarticulate "sense" of right and wrong established in one narrow setting applies in new situations.

But what does the fact that we can sometimes articulate something in the way of premises or explanations tell us about "frameworks"? Are we, as Taylor insists, articulating a real thing which is tacit? Or are we doing something like this: When we are explaining ourselves to someone who doesn't understand us, we can and do imagine what they would need to know in order to understand us and articulate it. In short, we fill in our own enthymemes, if we think others are taking them as enthymemes. There is no reason to think that by doing so we are articulating a "framework" or that doing so requires a "framework." The fact that we articulate things is not evidence that there is a complex unified object like a framework that we presuppose. It is evidence of our ability to respond to the needs of others and to put ourselves into their position.

Similarly, the fact that there are such things as explicit frameworks—ideologies, in the traditional sense of the word, that is to say something explicitly constructed and imposed—does not tell us that there are analogous tacit things in people's heads, tacitly constructed or imposed. To reason, emote, or feel *as if* one is doing it according to an ideology is not the same as doing it according to a tacit ideology. To ignore this is to erase the distinction between the tacit and the explicit by assuming it away.

IS TACIT KNOWLEDGE "KNOWLEDGE"?

If knowledge is, in the famous formula, justified true belief, the definition excludes what is known as tacit knowledge, the unarticulated or inarticulable knowledge that enables the scientist to perform experiments, make discoveries, and also to understand the reasoning in an area of science. What is tacit is by definition not "justified" and cannot be justified until it is no longer tacit, nor is the tacit "belief," in the usual sense.

What is tacit is not reasoned about in the same way as an explicit claim, justified according to more or less explicit conventions of evidence, such as the conventions of reporting results in scientific journals. We can recognize that there is a tacit component to knowledge and accept Polanyi's famous claim that all knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge. But this does not tell us what tacit knowledge is or how it works. There is no formula, analogous to "justified true belief," that we can treat even as a first approximation to an account of the "knowledge" part of the phrase "tacit knowledge."

Much of what is called tacit knowledge is "knowing how" rather than "knowing that" in Gilbert Ryle's terms (cf. Ryle 1949). But even this concept is clouded in controversy. "Knowing that" is a relation between a thinker and a true proposition. Arguably, knowing how to ride a bicycle, to take the standard example, involves some sort of "knowing that," such as knowing that *x* is the right way to ride a bicycle, with "way" meaning a way to engage in an action (Stanley and Williamson 2001). This is useful, because it enables us to distinguish knowledge-relevant abilities from such abilities as the ability to digest starch, although we could make the relevant distinctions in other ways, such as in terms of the manner by which an ability is acquired.

But in the end formulations of this kind do not help very much: We don't know what a "way" is, despite being able to put the term in a "knowledge that" proposition like "Hazel knows that there is a way to ride a bike." Indeed, the status of such a "way" is what is at issue in most discussions of tacit knowledge. If one asks how a "way" explains, there is no good answer. Where is it located? How does it causally interact with the world, with intentions, and how are ways produced and transmitted? There is no answer to these questions: The "way" is simply there, filling a place in an explanation schema. The question of whether tacit knowledge is really knowledge is a definitional quibble, but it points to a more fundamental problem which involves all of the analogical uses of concepts. Put "tacit" in front of terms like "rules," "norms," "premises," and so forth and one gets a problematic analogy. The analogy is justified because something in the way of a rule, norm, premise, and the like can be made explicit—although what this means and what exactly it is that is being made explicit is an open question. What is less of an open question is this: What is the difference between the acquisition of something tacit and the acquisition of something explicit?

Tacit knowledge, if we count it as knowledge, avoids some issues associated with propositional knowledge, not least Gettier problems. One can easily believe false propositions: We often accept something as true that we are told by others, for example. Learning something tacitly requires at least some sort of feedback. One could not mislearn the language you were raised in. To be sure, acquiring a habitual response or making a habitual inference as a result of feedback may produce errors, that is to say bad habits that

prove to be bad in new contexts. And of course one can be induced to form bad habits by being given a diet of feedback that produces them.

The fact that tacit learning requires feedback makes it radically unlike explicit learning. But in actual cases the two are mixed together: One learns a language of appraisal together with learning how to do things, for example. Each kind of learning has its own tacit component, because it has feedback that is not explicitly constructed, as an experiment or test of a hypothesis would be.

INDIVIDUAL OR COLLECTIVE?

A major issue with tacit knowledge is whether it is collective or individual. Start with the idea of a "way." Is it something that can be shared? And if so, what does it mean to be shared? That it is externally similar and produces more or less the same result? Or something stronger. Does it *have* to be shared, or shareable, as a proposition would be, in order to be knowledge? Does it function to enable mutual understanding if it is shared? And if the sharing is not merely about externals and results, or emulation, how exactly can tacit things be shared? There is no standard story here, but there is a commonplace one, derived from Kuhn's use of the concept as part of the concept of paradigm. It reappears in Foucault's accounts of power/knowledge and epistemes, not to mention such notions as Bourdieu's account of *habitus* and Harry Collins' account of collective tacit knowledge. These accounts run into their own problems: There is no plausible mechanism by which the tacit stuff can be reproduced in different minds, or "shared" (Turner 1994).

Habits, however, are individual: They are personally acquired, as a result of personal experiences and the particular processes of feedback that stabilize them, on the basis of a personal past, in accordance with other habits which are themselves personal and based on a personal past. And this seems to be not enough to make sense of our common life: of communication and mutual understanding. The temptation is to say that these things must be based on something that is shared.

The most influential recent version of this argument is Bourdieu's. His notion of *habitus* is wildly expansive. Bourdieu explains the effectiveness of customary law by *habitus*, noting that

> the rules of customary law have some practical efficacy only to the extent that, skillfully manipulated by the holders of authority within the clan . . . they "awaken," so to speak, the schemes of perception and appreciation deposited, in their incorporated state, in every member of the group, i.e., the dispositions of the *habitus*. (1977: 17)

These dispositions account for

> the practical mastery of the symbolism of social interaction—tact, dexterity, or savoir-faire—presupposed by the most everyday games of sociability and accompanied by the application of a spontaneous semiology, i.e., a mass of precepts, formulae, and codified cues. (1977: 10)

To make any sense in terms of his larger explanatory model, which involves the role of the inculcation of *habitus* in the reproduction of an oppressive social order, it needs to be a fixed and shared thing, "incorporated into every member of the group," as he says, with so to speak a mind of its own and a teleological directionality that overrides and directs individual motivation. Most important, of course, is that it is a collective object, not just a set of individual habits and dispositions. It directs individuals to collective ends.

The concept illustrates a crucial problem with "sharing." The more that one loads into the concept, the less plausible it becomes, because the more power to direct the mind and the more content that is ascribed to it the more difficult it becomes to explain how this thing actually comes to be shared. Not only "a mass of precepts, formulae, and codified cues" but "schemes of perception and appreciation," dispositions, and so forth need to be "incorporated" in "everymember of the group." The more that needs to be incorporated the more difficult it becomes to explain how it all can be incorporated in every member of the group. And there is a related problem: Ascribing too much power of direction to the *habitus* risks turning people into what Harold Garfinkel called cultural dopes—automata enacting routines (1967). People are not like this. The solution to the problem for Bourdieu is to say that people share it, but improvise. But this is a tricky gambit: If you allow too much improvisation, you lose the sense that *habitus* determines anything, that it meets some sort of explanatory need, and lose the sense that there is any hard-core collectively shared fact about *habitus*.

"Ways" opens up a much larger question about buried or hidden forms of knowledge. What about the knowledge contained in instruments? The users of tools, no less than the users of expert systems, are relying on knowledge that they typically do not possess but which has been, so to speak, built into the object. Similarly with routines: One may follow them mindlessly, as long as they succeed, vary them and so forth, but without knowing or caring about their invention, design, or the knowledge behind them.

But this raises a question about underdetermination. The same result can be produced using different routines. So producing a routine tells us nothing about the actual processes involved. Moreover, the solutions are solutions to artificially limited problems selected or defined by the researcher. This is a point that applies very widely, for example to the claims of ethnomethodologists to reveal underlying rules of social interaction. In each of these cases, we are faced both with underdetermination, or the existence of a vast number of alternative ways of modeling the supposed process, and artificiality resulting from the selection of a particular characterization

of the process as the correct representation of the thing to be modeled. If routines can be produced in a variety of ways, there is no reason not to think that this applies to persons as well—that the tacit conditions of their performances are different from the tacit conditions of others performing the same thing.

This has direct implications for the idea that there can be anything collective and tacit. What we learn, acquire, and assimilate tacitly we can only do through the surfaces of things: We can emulate another person's actions, or performances, perform actions for which we get feedback, and otherwise respond to data from the world. This feedback may be extensive enough to produce behavioral uniformity. And uniformity may be produced by explicit means—by drill or instruction. But there is no alternative pipeline into the tacit that assures that the tacit contents are the same or shared by the rest of the collectivity. There is nothing analogous to a central computer server providing constant updates to computer programs that reproduces identical programs in multiple computers.

A FINAL NOTE ON WITTGENSTEIN

One of the reviewers of this manuscript suggested that I add a chapter on Wittgenstein and the relation of this argument to Wittgenstein. There are of course Wittgensteinian roots to this discussion, which can be best explained in terms of my earlier *Sociological Explanation as Translation* (1980), which was heavily Wittgensteinian, and a more Quinean approach to the same problems, "Translating Ritual Beliefs" (1979). Both of these texts, and especially the first, were concerned with what I later called the Mauss problem (1994: 19–24), which results from the fact that stating and recognizing a practice as "social," as distinct, for example, from natural or rational, required an alternative social starting point, that is to say familiarity with another practice that differed from the practice one was characterizing, or at least a starting point in which the practice did not exist. Moreover, recognizing one's own practices as practices required this.

This implied that calling a practice "social" in the first place, or indeed calling it a practice at all, was relative to a starting point in another practice, but also, and importantly, that what appeared as "the practice" would also be relative to a starting point. I expressed this in *Sociological Explanation as Translation* by the phrase "same-practices hypothesis," by which I meant that when the sociologist enters a new social situation she must continue to take for granted what she was already taking for granted. The "must" here is a de facto must: The analyst cannot avoid doing this. The same-practices hypothesis is an "as if" construction, however: This is not something researchers consciously do or can consciously do. What they consciously do is to construct accounts of the practices of others for an audience which has practices of its own, which are similar in some respects

and different in others—similar enough for them to be made sense of, different enough that the sense needs to be explicated. The similarity between this claim and Davidson's notion of interpretive charity is evident, although Davidson was concerned with beliefs rather than practices, that is to say the explicit rather than the tacit. But if the explicit is dependent on the tacit, interpretive charity needs to be extended to practices as well.

This issue appears in various forms in Wittgenstein, notably in his discussion of natural signs of an intention, his discussions of "agreement," and his characterization of the problem of understanding Martians. "Agreement" is an analogical term, but Wittgenstein's meaning is captured in this passage:

> Suppose someone heard syncopated music of Brahms played and asked: "What is the queer rhythm which makes me wobble?" "It is the 3 against 4." One could play certain phrases and he would say: "Yes. It's this peculiar rhythm I meant." On the other hand, if he didn't agree, this wouldn't be an explanation. ([1938] 1967: 20–21)

This corresponds with what I will discuss in Chapter 10 as *Evidenz*. In discussing the problem of interpreting in anthropological contexts, he contrasts what we would do with what we would do if we faced Martians instead:

> If you came to a foreign tribe, whose language you didn't know at all and you wished to know what words corresponded to 'good', 'fine', etc., what would you look for? You would look for smiles, gestures, food, toys. ([Reply to objection:] If you went to Mars and men were spheres with sticks coming out, you wouldn't know what to look for. ([1938] 1967: 2)

With Martians, we lack natural signs of intention, among other things. This marks the distinction between the universal and the realm of practices or agreement. But Wittgenstein does not concern himself with the question of how we distinguish natural signs from signs that are signs by agreement when we encounter a situation where we are struggling to understand another person. Our knowledge of both kinds of signs is tacit.

It is a commonplace anthropological observation that we can be misled by taking signs or facial expressions as natural when they are in fact conventional and have a different meaning in the target culture. In these cases we stumble into the difference and need to construct for ourselves an analogue to a translation manual. This translation manual is going to be relative to the needs we have and therefore to what we already understand tacitly as the significance of the signs: If we learn that a frown means anxiety rather than disapproval, we calibrate accordingly, and at the same time recognize the sign as conventional or cultural. If we came from a society that frowned when anxious, we would not need a manual.

This is simple enough. But complications arise when we get into the subtleties of characterizing a different culture or follow Wittgenstein when he says about aesthetic taste that

> The words we call expressions of aesthetic judgment play a very complicated role, but a very definite role, in what we call a culture of period. To describe their use or to describe what you mean by cultured taste, you have to describe a culture. ([1938] 1967: 8)

To "describe" a culture one must deploy many comparisons to one's own culture, or in the idiom that one is explaining. The object cannot be characterized in any other way than in one's native idiom. So the object one describes is constructed as a practice in a way that is relative to that idiom, and not in some universal idiom. Facts about practices are thus not universal or culture-free, but are relative to the idiom in which they are explicated. This is not in Wittgenstein, although it is implied. And there is more that is consistent with Wittgenstein that bears on these formulations.

The tacit knowledge required for a particular performance or act—throwing a curve ball, for example—is individual in a complex way: It is embodied, and people with different physical characteristics need to adapt in different ways to get the result; some people do naturally what others need to be coached to do, and the tacit knowledge possessed by one person learning to perform the act is different from the knowledge possessed by others; moreover, in the end, the performances are not "the same" in a microscopic sense, but different in ways that reflect the combination of first-nature embodiment, second-nature embodiment of tacit knowledge, and explicit knowledge that produce the performance. What holds here holds for the tacit generally: What we make explicit when we help someone to understand, or perform, is relative to the need for understanding that they have in a particular situation in which they already possess tacit knowledge. But what each person possesses varies, and thus so does the need and the explicit formulation that responds to it.

Wittgenstein does not go this far. Nor does he need to, given the therapeutic purposes of his later writings, in which, for example, an analogical use of the notion of rule to apply to tacit rules can serve a purpose without committing him to some sort of ontology of rules.[2] In a sense, the recognition of the situated character of the tacit parallels the shift from the model of a set of "enormously complicated" presupposed tacit conventions in the *Tractatus* ([1921] 1961) to the therapeutic model of the *Investigations* ([1953] 2009) and also reflects the recognition that the solution of philosophical problems is always situated in specific linguistic contexts, and is possible only from within. The lesson of Wittgenstein is that there is no external "transcendental" presuppositional order to which one can go to solve philosophical problems—a lesson too often forgotten today. The problem of the a priori, in short, is a part, but not the whole, of the problem of the tacit.


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