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# Inquiring Organizations and Tacit Knowing

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## Abstract

Churchman's five Inquiring Systems are considered in the light of Polanyi's distinction between Tacit Knowing and Practical Thinking. It is suggested that the five Inquiring Systems are distinct and crucial elements of the Learning Organization that can be divided into two perspectives: the modes of Tacit Knowing and the levels of Practical Thinking. Tacit Knowing critically contributes to the sustainable growth of an organization through its connection with (1) intuition (2) holism, and (3) ethics.

## Introduction

Ideas, and the beliefs that underpin them, are not immovable objects nurtured by the interests of a few but are vehicles which potentially transport us to change and through change to growth. It is clear, at the turn of the century, that the time interval between theoretical discovery and their practical applications is getting shorter (than previously). Churchman's account of Inquiring Organizations carries the potential for shortening the theoretical/practical gap in a way that carries us through the changes that arise out of these discoveries and applications to sustainable human growth. The potential lies in comprehending and exploring in a sustainable way the fact that Churchman's five Inquiring Systems articulate themselves through two perspectives: (1) as modes of Tacit Knowing, and (2) as varying levels of Practical Thinking. The claim of this paper accordingly places Pragmatism into one of those two perspectives, rather than as Kienholz' asserts, as the viewpoint which "sees four levels at once" [Kienholz, 1999, p 9]. In other words, this paper disagrees that Pragmatism (as one of the five Inquiring System "types") is able to see each of the other four Inquiring System types at once.

## Polanyi's Practical Thinking and Tacit Knowing

From [Haynes, 1999a, p 56-60], we can begin to appreciate Polanyi's distinction between Practical thinking and Tacit knowing (also referred to as, respectively, Practical and Theoretical knowledge [Polanyi 1967, pp 5,6]) with a paradox that Polanyi

himself discovered in Plato's work the *Meno*. Prosch [Prosch, 1986, p 96] mentions that:

To search for the solution to a problem, Plato told us there [the *Meno*], would seem to be absurd, since, if you know what you are looking for, then there is no problem. If you do not know what you are looking for, then you cannot expect to find anything. Polanyi maintained that this was a genuine paradox. Because, "to see a problem is to see something that is hidden. It is to have the intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars". Yet in spite of the apparent contradiction, involved in claiming to be able to see a problem, pointed out by Plato long ago, Polanyi noted that people have continued for two thousand years to see and solve many problems. What the *Meno* really shows, therefore, said Polanyi, is not that knowing is impossible (as indeed Plato also thought it did not show) but "that if all knowledge is explicit, i.e. capable of being clearly stated, then we cannot know a problem or look for a solution"<sup>1</sup>. Since we apparently do know good problems that can be solved, knowing a problem must be, he held, a kind of tacit knowledge, like the knowledge we have of a face or a class, a knowledge of which we cannot give a fully explicit account, but which nonetheless does exist.

In above the passage Polanyi is giving an example of Tacit Knowing. For more abundant proof, Polanyi says precisely this in his *Tacit Dimension* [Polanyi, 1967, pp 22-23] "the kind of tacit knowledge that solves the paradox of the *Meno* consists in the intimation of something hidden, which we may yet discover". Another way of appreciating how Tacit Knowing solves the paradox of the *Meno*, is to consider a situation where rational thinking is argued not to apply. Flemons in *Completing Distinctions* notes a situation based on Taoist principles where rational knowledge is argued to be of no use. Consider the following passage [Flemons, 1991, p 70]:

If we are up against a mystery, then we dare act only on the most modest assumptions. The modern scientific program has held that we must act on the basis of knowledge .. but if we are up against a mystery, then knowledge is relatively small, and the ancient program is the right one: act on the basis of ignorance<sup>2</sup>.

In other words, from the above passage the meaning is that in acting from ignorance we are not contaminating our intuition (inner teaching) with our rational knowledge

<sup>1</sup> *Tacit Dimension*, [Polanyi, 1967, p22]

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Wendel Berry, in *Home Economics*, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1987, pp 4-5.

(outer teaching). In this strict sense then ignorance can ultimately know more than knowledge.

On the other hand, practical knowledge for Polanyi does not have any hidden aspects to it. Practical knowledge gives rise to rational thinking or Practical Thinking. In the *Tacit Dimension* [Polanyi, 1967, p 32, 33], Polanyi states that things for which practical knowledge is appropriate are “less real” than things for which Tacit Knowing applies. He gives the example of cobblestones as being more real [than tacitly known things] in the sense of being more tangible, but less real in the sense that they have no hiddenness to them. Polanyi’s views of the objects of practical knowledge align fairly closely with Heidegger’s concept of a thing. Joseph Kocklemans in his book *On the Truth of Being - Reflections on Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*, had this to say about a third conception of a Heideggerian thing that I conclude is close to Polanyi’s object of practical knowledge [Kockelmans, 1984, pp 175,176]:

The thing is nothing but formed matter; and this conception also holds good for both natural and man made things. This conception accounts for the thingly element we find in every work of art.

If an object then is “thingly” it exhibits an absence of hiddenness if and only if it is the pure “thingliness” of the object that we are considering. Under such circumstances it is a candidate for being an object of practical knowledge. Drawing upon definitions from Keinholtz [Keinholtz, 1999, p 9, Table 1], we can determine that objects of practical knowledge are subject to the laws of cause and effect and are capable of event analysis and are thereby the Practical Thinking domain of the Realist. Similarly objects of practical knowledge are observed objectively and are highly conducive to pattern analysis and are, accordingly, a Practical Thinking domain of the Analyst. Finally objects of practical knowledge are above all objects of expediency and are perfect for tactical rearrangement – but so to are the outcomes of the Idealist and the Synthesist. Accordingly, the Practical Thinking of the Pragmatist sees practical knowledge and interprets (as a category mistake) the mode of Tacit Knowing in the same way. The heart of this misconception is clearly located in the view that Pragmatism wants to isolate “kinds of truth”. This is a damning claim that, in the end, gives away Pragmatism’s own inability to tacitly know itself! Accordingly, Pragmatism has no sense of Truth as an essence. So what is the essence of Pragmatism? By its own tenets the answer arises that it depends on what kind of truth you take! Consider the following quotation from Rorty [Rorty, 1982, p 2]:

Pragmatism cuts across this transcendental/empirical distinction by questioning the common presupposition that there is an invidious distinction to be drawn between kinds of truths. For the pragmatist, true sentences are not true because they correspond to reality, and so there is no need to worry

what sort of reality, if any, a given sentence corresponds to -no need to worry about what "makes" it true. ... So the pragmatist sees no need to worry about whether Plato or Kant was right in thinking that something non-spatio-temporal made moral judgments true, nor about whether the absence of such a thing means that such judgments are is merely expressions of emotion" or "merely conventional" or "merely subjective.

## Tacit Knowing as Intuition

The paradox of the Meno is a key metaphor for enacting innovative solutions to maintain the sustainable growth of an organization in the face of uncertainty. Accordingly, if we apply each of the five Inquiring System types to the problem of the paradox of the Meno, then we discover that only the Synthesist and the Idealist can solve it. The key ingredient for both Synthesist and Idealist is intuition. In the case of the Synthesist, making a distinction between appearance and reality (a key feature of a Synthesist) already presupposes that intuition is operational. Since by definition appearance cannot at the same time be real, then it must be intuited to be other than real insofar as it appears to be real. Similarly the Idealist presupposes intuition to enable its key feature of the development of a personal vision through inquiry and reflection. A vision holds the potential for a real creation, it is fluid and capable of either vanishing or being brought into being. Accordingly it is not capable of pragmatic manipulation (Pragmatist), or part-like pattern analysis (Analyst) or object-like analysis (Realist). Alternatively, the Idealist, reflects upon the vision and thus provides the necessary intuition for the vision’s further enhancement. On this basis the Idealist and Synthesist are 2 modes of Tacit Knowing and the Pragmatist, Analyst and Realist are 3 levels of Practical Thinking.

## Tacit Knowing as Holism

Both the Synthesist and the Idealist develop a viewpoint out of which they create respectively their mental models and personal visions [Keinholtz, 1999, p 9, Table 1]. The viewpoint, so-called, is essentially an ethic, namely, our own systems of accepted convictions, from within which we speak with conviction, or what I take to be an instance of a belief in our own beliefs. But a belief in our own beliefs arises out of the whole system of acceptances. Not from one piece of knowledge; not one reasoned bit; not one logical element or group of logical elements, but the whole system.

## Tacit Knowing as Ethics

The power of a individual ethic arises because it is respectful of the whole system of acceptances. The emergence of an ethic for an individual - ethic being a belief in the good of things: action that both benefits the individual self and others in that one action - is not

sidetracked by any individual desire. Nor is it sidetracked by any set of instances of self-gratification, but subsumes all of these desires and groups into the whole system of beliefs and takes its grounding from that synthesis. In this way an ethic develops independently of any logical or reasoned process. We do not condition our ethic by analysing it, rather our ethic arises out of the integration of all of our beliefs and desires. So our ethic is distilled and distinctly non-logical; non-reasoned and independent of “intellectual” processes. Our ethic retains its capacity for intuition because it is independent of reasoning and therefore emerges out of a deep sense of care. We are all born with this deep sense of care. The quicker the emergence, I would suggest, the purer is the process of its being grounded and continuation for being grounded. One can imagine a paradigm case of an individual not being able to produce an ethic from which to base intuitions. Such a case would arise where certain obsessions and biases of self-gratification precluded a synthesis of the whole of the individual beliefs.

Consider now why the question “why does ethics ground intuition and logic and reasoning does not?” already contains the seeds of its own answer, or already provides a viewing of the “tacit” hiddenness of the answer [Haynes, 1999b]. Nor does it depend on the arrangement of words, I argue in Polanyian terms that a recognition of the hiddenness is still possible given further re-arrangements, such as:

Does intuition come from ethics or logic and reasoning?

I have indicated that for Polanyi ethics arises or emerges from a distillation of beliefs, and that such a distillation must have at some stage brought together both opposing and consistent beliefs. It is the critical nature of emergence that provides the clues to the recognition of hiddenness. Polanyi, as Webb notes [Webb, 1988, p 48] does “discuss a further major concept .. that of ‘emergence’.” But Webb further comments [ .. p 48] that Lonergan “makes better use of it than Polanyi succeeded in doing”. In *Philosophers of Consciousness*, Webb [Webb, 1988, p 78] indicates Lonergan’s extension to Polanyi’s concept of emergence was the recognition that things that are viewed as recognised as having hidden qualities have “proportionate beings ... [ and have] .. ‘parallel structures’ to our knowing”. Webb further comments of Lonergan’s contribution [ .. p 79] that by “proportionate being, he says, is intrinsically intelligible because it is precisely that which we are able to inquire into”. In other words there is something in the question itself that triggers a response in the system of beliefs. What does this mean? It means that in asking a question for which we can recognise a hidden answer, we are putting forward a question that has already been asked at an unconscious level. At this unconscious level the asking

has been “sorted out”<sup>3</sup> and we, as an individual, are now putting that question forward for the conscious level of our being to apprehend. This is the way tacit knowing is both recognised as hidden and how it makes itself manifest as a process of uncovering what is hidden.

## Conclusion

All managers are vitally aware of how important intuition is as a guiding principle for their organizations. Yet the literature is relatively silent on how it can be integrated into a Learning Organization. This paper has addressed a way of highlighting Tacit Knowing as a key for understanding the intuitional and ethical aspects of the Idealist and the Synthesist (2 of the 5 Churchmanian Inquiring System types). The gap between theory and practice is the distinction between Tacit and Practical thinking. Once this distinction is understood the gap can be shortened in a sustainable way. Further work entails the connection between ethics and intuition and the fact that ethics incorporating intuition within a Learning Organization is the key to enabling sustainable organizational growth.

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<sup>3</sup> Or more precisely placed within the context of the synthesis of the whole system of beliefs.

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