

Tacit Knowledge

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(1) Tacit knowledge is the theme of this exhibition, and so also of this afternoon talk. I was asked to say something of it from a philosophical point of view, which is an exciting task for a number of reasons. One of them is that here, in an art gallery, one can imagine the notion of tacit knowledge in a way coming back home to where it originally belonged, that is, back to the world from which philosophy once borrowed it. This is of course not to say that a concept of tacit knowledge had been some kind of a topic dealt with by artists at this time, and then consequently would have become a topic in philosophy as well. I hope I am not entirely wrong if I say that it is not really the business of art to come up with concepts and then by these explicating and clarifying something whatever.

Well, you perhaps want to return to this question concerning the proper business of art in the end, but what I mean by this homecoming, at this point, is rather only that when 'tacit knowledge' was employed in philosophy, where it served the purpose of reflecting the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, it was the practice of art that decisively substantiated the philosophical theory that came out, the theory of tacit knowledge. Michael Polanyi, the man who introduced the notion of tacit knowledge and spent two decades trying to elaborate it, had during those years artistic practices in his mind. Or, to suit our words to the theme, one should maybe say that artistic practice was *in the back of his mind* because the place of tacit knowledge is indeed somewhere in the back of mind, or even in the body, rather than in the foreground, in the torchlight, of mind.

Michael Polanyi's field originally was physical chemistry, but there was a point in his career at which he turned away from his daily grind and embarked on an entirely different project. This was to try making sense of how new discoveries, knowledge of yet unknown things, can be made in science. Tacit knowledge was his key to the mystery of discovery. Tacit knowledge implies that one really knows all the time much more than one can ever tell. This is indeed the core of it: we know but cannot tell. A body of non-discursive knowledge exists, which is something that one's life has taught over the years, but one has learned it without any awareness of the process of learning. The etymological origin of the word 'tacit' illuminates the idea from another angle: the word comes from the Latin verb *tacēre*, 'to be silent', from which then derives *tacitus*, latin for tacit. Therefore, tacit means things upheld and happening under silence.

Silence is not ignorance, but knowledge without awareness. This, according to Polanyi's theory, is the ground from which any explicit knowledge must grow. This idea is in fact one of the oldest in philosophy of knowledge. For example, Plato's dialogue *Meno* presents an ignorant slave who amazingly can solve complex geometrical problems presented to him by Socrates. Even an uncultivated man, a man that has not received any education, can solve difficult problems that have never come in his way before. Elsewhere in Plato, there is a mythical explanation given to this

mystery. At the end of his dialogue *Republic* Plato tells a story of a man called Er, who died in a battlefield but woke up again at his funeral. He tells us what he saw in the world beyond.

This is the way it goes for all of us. After having spent some time in the life hereafter, we will be born again in this world. Before that, however, everything (the structure of the universe, the truth, etc.) is shown to us, and for that passing moment we become omniscient, knowledgeable of all things. But just before our birth, we will be asked to drink from the river Lethe, and the water of that river makes us forget everything again. Lethe is a mythical goddess and a river in Hades, and as a word in Greek language '*lethe*' indeed means forgetfulness. What particularly intrigues us here is that from that word, *lethe*, derives also the word *aletheia*, the Greek for 'truth'. So truth was *a-letheia*, which demonstrates that truth was understood by the Greeks as un-forgetfulness, cancelling or reversal of forgetting, regaining what one already has known, but has forgotten. The basic idea is the same in tacit knowledge: one already knows without knowing that one knows.

(2) Leaving the mysteries of science aside, I hope there is still enough time for trying to enter the theme of tacit knowledge from a slightly different angle. This is the perspective of practices and arts, or the perspective of the practice of an art. At this moment, 'art' should be understood in a broad sense, as involving all types of skills, not only 'arts' in the sense of making artworks like these ones around us in this gallery. Theorists of tacit knowledge – such as Polanyi, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Pierre Bourdieu just to name some – often used such examples of arts as swimming or bicycle riding, playing the piano or football, to illuminate the type of knowledge employed in practices of arts. Common to all practices are at least two things.

The first common thing is that it is very hard to explain theoretically how these things are done, so that the best masters of these arts indeed *do know how, but cannot necessarily tell how*. It is obvious that a child who has learned cycling or swimming, or a great footballer just alike, is very much pleased to *show* her skills, but when some kind of *account* is requested, she would have no clue.

The second common thing is that one can learn the mastery of arts only by way of practicing them. This is why one indeed must *practice* these arts; things are done not only for some external goals or end-products, but also for the purposes of training, maintenance of the skill. (And of course just for the fun of it, as when swimming back and forth in a pool.) For this reason one says that there is a *self-contained dimension* to any practice of art: the end, the goal, of practice as practice is to practice well, rather than to achieve something external.

According to its theory, the dwelling place of tacit knowledge is exactly in these kinds of self-contained practices. They are mastered, but it is hard to tell how, it is hard to give an account on the practice, even for the best masters. Now, this type of theory of swimming and cycling and other such things is perhaps not very interesting in this context, but to have a look at the beginning point of the theory of practices – and thus also of the theory of tacit knowledge – you may find more interesting, perhaps even quite important, for your own practice as artist. This beginning point is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Aristotelian ethics of *eudaimon* (literally: 'good demon') is different from the modern concept of ethics in that it does not concern anything such as moral rules and norms that one should try implementing in one's actions. For Aristotle, ethics is indeed an art, art of living, which can be learned only by way of practicing and which is self-contained in a very fundamental way: art of life if it is practiced for the sake of life, practicing well is to live well.

Good life requires that one has gained the capacity to deal with the irrational part of one's soul. This is a capacity that can be achieved only in practice and action, not by reading books or learning rules by heart. The two notions by which Aristotle designates this capacity are *ethos* (character) and *hexis* (disposition), later translated into Latin as '*habitus*'. Good character and disposition result from one's excellence in critical situations of life, nothing else can bring them to you. Critical situations, in turn, are those where one must struggle for the mastery of the irrational part of one's soul. The two irrational elements of the soul that constantly challenge one's *ethos*, put it under a test, are one's fears and desires. Finally, the two most important virtues to deal with these are courage and temperance. Courage means the mastery of one's fears without plunging into recklessness. Temperance, in turn, means mastery of one's desires without repressing them too much.

Looking at the context in which Aristotle presented his ethics, his theory of the art of life, one realises that a more or less direct link exists between Aristotelian ethics and the theory of tacit knowledge. This context is Aristotle's disagreement with his former mentor, Plato. In his early dialogues, Plato had suggested, or at least discussed, the possibility that all cardinal virtues – *andreia* (courage), *sophrosyne* (temperance), *dikaiosune* (justice), and *phronesis* (good judgment) – and thus also the whole of ethics could indeed be brought into explicit knowledge, elucidated as things that one can master by reason. Aristotle saw that the art of living is not ultimately a matter for the reasoning part of the soul, but more important are one's dealings with the irrational parts of the soul. These are fears and desires that do escape our rational faculty and explicit knowledge, but maybe not our tacit knowledge and your practice of artistic work.