The tacit dimension and Michael Polanyi: 
a personal intimation

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This is a slightly revised version of my introduction to the portuguese language edition (2010) of Michael Polanyi' *The tacit dimension.*

Jackdaws identified in part 6 have been maintained in all the english versions of the book. Although they are minor details of Polanyi work, we expect they can be considered in the future.

I decided to make this english version available after attending The Polanyi Society 2012 conference, in Chicago.

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The tacit dimension and Michael Polanyi: a personal intimation

M. Polanyi (1891 to 1976) was one of the great thinkers of the twentieth century, with an unorthodox and innovative approach, “out of the box” to the current schools of philosophy. His importance and influence is still growing, and his ideas do have now a great influence in very different areas of knowledge and science. A well known scientist, graduated in medicine and chemistry, with a PhD in chemistry, he was one of the founding fathers of physical chemistry, with fundamental contributions to the atomic theory of absorption and to understand heterogeneous catalysis, one of the most important technologies in industrial chemistry and chemical engineering in twentieth century. Three of his students (Melvin Calvin, John Polanyi and Eugene Wigner) were awarded Nobel Prizes, perhaps a unique case in science.

Polanyi was a man of his century, who lived through all the agonizing confrontations and ideological and existential battlefields that characterized the first half of last century. His “post critical” philosophy continues to have deep implications for epistemology, as he intended to go beyond the dominant paradigm of rationalist thought. Polanyi’s theory of knowledge is based on the idea that all knowledge is personal, with the indispensable participation of the thinking being, and that even the so-called explicit knowing (or formal, or specifiable knowledge) is always based on personal mechanisms of tacit knowing.
His analysis of tacit knowing has nowadays a major impact, from the natural sciences, to engineering, and to social sciences and humanities. His idea of tacit knowledge has often been twisted and misused – but, in any case, few theories based on the philosophy of knowledge had such an impact as his theory of tacit and personal knowing. For Polanyi, knowing is an act (an activity, not something external) whose result is not knowledge, but understanding and discovery. For Polanyi knowledge is the act of knowing.

The Tacit Dimension \(^{(a)}\) was the last book published by Michael Polanyi as single author. In 1966 Michael Polanyi was over eighty years old, thirty years after he phased out the labs of chemistry and committed himself into the fields of philosophy and social sciences. Before he died (in 1976) Polanyi would still publish Meaning \(^{(b)}\), co-authored with Harry Prosch, one less known last work, that has caused some controversy. Prosch was to write later an important critique of Polanyi philosophy \(^{(c)}\).

As usual in Polanyi, his introductions are short, but relevant: the two pages of the preface to the first edition of his most important work, Personal Knowledge, (1958) \(^{(d)}\), provides a clear overview of his objectives and his vision of the personal coefficient as a vital component of any knowledge. In a later edition (1964) \(^{(e)}\) Polanyi wrote a new preface which is an important manifesto of his philosophy, and that preface became a reference by itself \(^{(f)}\).

In the introduction to The tacit dimension, Polanyi puts this work into context, traces its origins and classifies it as a "good summary" of his position, taking into
account the many developments that he had been publishing since the first edition of *Personal Knowledge* (1958), and even the later contributions to *The study of man* (1959) (g), a "small work" (his own words) that Polanyi saw as an additional theory of historiography, an extension of the theory of personal knowledge developed in his earlier work.

*The tacit dimension* can be read as a synthesis (almost) final of Polanyi’s thought, even as an intellectual testament, which closes into the concept of a "society of explorers," free human beings but faced with their own responsibility, people integrating previous collective knowledge (basically through tacit mechanisms), knowledge emergent from the cultural tradition where they happened to be born and to grow.

A "society of explorers" built on the emergence of man (and the "noosphere", an idea of Teilhard de Chardin (h), adopted and shared by Polanyi), result of an evolution structured by layers with qualitative differences.

*The tacit dimension* resulted from the Terry Lectures 1962/63 – as *Personal Knowledge* has resulted from several years of work following the Gifford Lectures, 1951/52.

The Terry Lectures at Yale University (USA) are an endowment from 1905 by Dwight Harrington Terry, of Bridgeport (Connecticut,) and it is one of the most prestigious annual events at Yale, since its beginning in 1923. The Terry Lectures defy prominent scholars in the fields of religion, science and philosophy to elaborate about the implications of science and philosophy on religion, and of
religion on the everyday life of man. The aim of the founder was not exactly the
discovery and promotion of scientific research, but rather the assimilation or
integration of the discoveries and developments in science and philosophy into the
religious experience: the founder believed that a religion influenced by such
developments would be a religion stimulating intelligent efforts to improve the
human condition, and its progress in terms of human character, so helping to
promote happiness on earth.

In the same year of Polanyi, Norbert Wiener (the father of cybernetics) was also
invited by Terry Lectures, and he spoke about "The philosopher before symbols",
after Paul Rincouer having dealt with the relations between Freud and philosophy
in the previous year. Two years before Margaret Mead talked about "cultural
continuities in evolution."

The original title for the conferences of Polanyi during Terry Lectures 1962/63 was
"Man and thought: a symbiosis". Title was later changed to The tacit dimension.
In turn, Gifford Lectures were established in Scotland in 1885 by a jurist, Adam
Lord Gifford, to promote the "knowledge of God", in a broad and naturalistic way.
Since 1888 the conferences of Gifford Lectures are distributed between the Scottish
universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St. Andrews, and it is one of the
most prestigious academic initiatives in the fields of philosophy, science and
theology. We may consider them as the transatlantic equivalent to Terry Lectures,
Yale.

The Gifford Lectures of 1951-52 were the responsibility of Michael Polanyi and held
at Aberdeen University, and they started the process that culminated in the
publication of Personal Knowledge. On the issues immediately before and after the
1951-52 Gifford Lectures we may find the names of Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich,
Raymond Aron and Anna Arendt.
But *The study of man* has also resulted from an invitation to Polanyi by a similar initiative, The Lindsay Memorial Lectures, which were held during 1958 in the (then) University College of North Staffordshire. So the final trilogy of Polanyi books all had their origins in invitations to conferences based on legacies — which speaks about their own importance, and the importance of tradition in the promotion of discovery — an idea certainly appreciated by Polanyi.

*The tacit dimension* is the most quoted book by Polanyi, even more quoted than his major work, *Personal Knowledge*. Google Scholar recorded more than ten thousand citations for *The tacit dimension*, compared to about 9400 together for several versions of *Personal Knowledge*.

Despite tacit processes had already been intensively discussed in the previous book, *The tacit dimension* happens to be the only book by Polanyi where the magic word (*tacit*) appears in the title. *Tacit* has known a growing popularity in academia, particularly in areas dealing with the issues of knowledge, personal or organizational.

The wave of *knowledge management* at the end of the twentieth century have contributed to the increased popularity of this book of Polanyi, more than fifty years after the initial publication of *Personal Knowledge* — a rare tribute to the force and depth of Polanyi thought, an exceptional recognition of the impact of his thought in multiple areas of knowledge sharing activities like to learn, to discover, to understand.
It is true that some of the citations regarding *The tacit dimension* may not to have read it carefully - the case of Nonaka \(^9\) being perhaps one of the most notorious. The timeliness of *The tacit dimension* can be assessed by the recent publication of a new english language edition in 2009, once again by University of Chicago Press. This edition reproduces (facsimile) the original edition of 1966, with an introduction by Amartya Sen \(k\).

According to Polanyi's philosophy, knowing is done by internal mechanisms of integration and reorganization in the mind of someone who knows. To know (to understand) other's mind means being able to live (to share) what the other. Understanding someone else is an intimate process of sharing ideas. Translating a thinker like Polanyi implies that same intimacy, to internalize ("indwelling") its ideas and associated skills - a personal challenge, a call that we intended to answer. Polanyi would call it perhaps a personal "intimation". To translate this Polanyi book has been a very exciting exercise - and certainly not without difficulties. Perhaps it can considered as boldness, since we do not usually work in the academic field of philosophy. But the non availability of Polanyi's works in Portuguese language was an intimation, an important personal intimation for the project we began. Is it worthwhile? The question may be both nonsense and relevant. Nonsense because the availability of Polanyi thought is a justification by itself, when translated into portuguese, one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Relevant because the current academic world, especially in scientific and technical environments, nowadays evaluates translation
as a less noble, less innovative and less valuable activity. To publish in English seems to have become an obsession - just see how to publish in Portuguese language is systematically "penalized" by the evaluation tools that tend to prevail nowadays in the Portuguese academy.

We adopted a graphical layout intended to facilitate the reading, and to help to overcome the dense character and structure of the text, in particular the lack of captions, or sections within chapters. Relevant captions of the text are shown in the lateral. Original notes are shown close to the citation point (a chapter with endnotes is also included, as in original text). Some translation notes have been added in order to make clear the original intent of the author.

We believe that the notes 6 and 7 of the original edition are in the wrong order, considering their content and context of citation. Although this have been held in all editions of the book, we decided switch them in this edition. We think that editions published by "facsimile" (including the reprint of 2009) have perhaps contributed to this error not to have been detected.

Original version has a reference to Austin Ferrar (page xx). Polanyi talks about “his book about the freedom of the will” (page xx). An entry for Ferrar, A. also has been included in the index of the English language edition. But it seems to be a jackdaw. Polanyi intended to make a reference to Austin Ferrer (1904 to 1968), whose Gifford Lectures (1956-57) were entitlted “The freedom of will” (publishe as a book in 1958 (1)). Polanyi does not include a direct citation to this book. But Austin Ferrer has been a very important philosopher and theologian of the Church of England. His book deals with the issues of mind and body, motivation and choice, responsibility and freedom. This jackdaw has been maintained in several editions of The tacir dimension, including last one (2009). This entry in our final index has been updated.
In our final index we do include a few new entries, tagged with (*) mark.

We thank Professor John Polanyi, Michael Polanyi’s son and manager of this publishing rights, for his permission to this translation and for his comments on a first draft of this introduction. Thanks also to my wife, Maria Leonor Fernandes, the help to review the text and to correct multiple mistakes and misspellings. Obviously, I take full responsibility for all errors.

English version, revised June 2012.

Notes:
(A) Polanyi, M., *The tacit dimension*, Doubleday, 1966
(B) Polanyi, M. and H. Prosch, *Meaning*, University of Chicago Press, 1977
(F) Both texts, as well as other parts of *Personal Knowledge*, are translated in Beira, E., "*Michael Polanyi (1958): Personal knowing*", Working papers WP86 (2009), available at www.dsi.uminho.pt / ebeira (in portuguese language)


(J) The main book from Nonaka (and Takeuchi) is *Knowledge Creating Company* (Oxford University Press, 1995), which is also the title of their very popular article published in Harvard Business Review (1991).


(L) Ferrer, A., *The freedom of will*, A. & C. Black, 1956