

TACIT KNOWLEDGE IN PLATO

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Applying the concept of tacit knowledge to several key areas in Plato's political theory illuminates obscurities and mitigates incoherencies in his thought, revealing a less totalitarian emphasis. It also provides a promising avenue for resolving a central epistemological problem that has occupied Western philosophy since its inception, namely, the formulation of a consistent version of skepticism.

Tacit Knowledge

Applying the concept of tacit knowledge to several key areas in Plato's political theory illuminates obscurities and mitigates incoherencies in his thought.¹ Tacit knowledge also reveals the extent to which Plato's thought, which has very often been regarded as elitist, can be seen as harboring a less totalitarian political aspect. Beyond this, it provides a promising avenue for resolving a central epistemological problem that has occupied Western philosophy from its inception, and that has received renewed urgency and prominence in the writings of Davidson, Putnam and Rorty (Davidson, 1984; Putnam, 1981; Rorty, 1979, 1982), among others (Botwinick, 1985). The problem has to do with formulating a consistent version of skepticism, one that would not be self-refuting.

In the writings of Michael Polanyi -- the physical chemist turned philosopher who has done more than anyone else to popularize and justify the notion in the twentieth century -- tacit knowledge originates as a solution to a problem. The problem is very succinctly stated at the beginning of Polanyi's 1962 Terry Lectures entitled *The Tacit Dimension*:

It seemed to me then that our whole civilization was pervaded by the dissonance of an extreme critical lucidity and an intense moral conscience, and that this combination had generated both our tight-lipped modern revolutions and the tormented self-doubt of modern man outside

revolutionary movements. So I resolved to inquire into the roots of this condition (Polanyi, 1967, p.4).

The cultural schizophrenia of modernity, which nurtures a “critical lucidity” that cannot justify action and evokes periodic mobilizations of moral passion that are not rationally informed or tempered, need to be healed by a more adequate, post-Kantian conception of knowledge. Tacit knowledge, at its simplest level, means that “we can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1967, p. 4). We can all adduce homely examples in support of this thesis. For instance, we recognize people’s faces, but cannot tell how we know. The scientific evidence that Polanyi invokes in defense of tacit knowledge comes from the field of psychology and is mainly of two sorts: the discernings of integrated wholes studied by Gestalt psychologists and the process called “subception.” Gestalt psychology has shown how we may know a physiognomy by “synthesizing” our awareness of its particulars without being able to identify those particulars. The phenomenon of “subception” refers to experiments in which psychologists presented subjects with a large number of nonsense syllables, and after showing some of the syllables administered an electric shock. Very soon, the subjects were able to anticipate the “shock syllables” without being able to identify what they were. An analogous experiment designed almost a decade later confirmed the phenomenon of “subception.”

Polanyi distinguishes between four aspects of the structure of tacit knowing: the functional, the phenomenal, the semantic and the ontological. The functional structure of tacit knowing consists in our knowing the first term (the nonsense syllables) only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second term (the electric shock). Borrowing from the language of anatomy, Polanyi calls the first term proximal and the second term distal. With regard to a human physiognomy, “we are attending from the features to the face, and thus may be unable to specify the features” (Polanyi, 1967, p. 10). The features, the proximal term of our knowledge, remain tacit in relation to the face, the distal, the more explicit focus of our knowledge.

We are aware of the proximal term in an act of tacit knowing (the nonsense syllables; the facial features) only in the *appearance* of the distal term (the electric shock; the face). Polanyi calls this the phenomenal structure of tacit knowing.

By the semantic aspect of tacit knowing, Polanyi is referring to the fact that “all meaning tends to be displaced away from ourselves” (1967, p. 13). The point of the analytic separation into the “proximal” and the “distal”

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terms of tacit knowing is to call attention to how the undifferentiated former term cues us into the more distinct latter term, so that, semantically speaking, the meaning of the proximal term of tacit knowing in each case is its use in alerting us to the presence of something else.

The ontological aspect of tacit knowing emphasizes that of which tacit knowing is knowledge. There are whole units of knowledge which compose the world that are constituted by their proximal and distal phases or moments. Both terms -- by their functional, phenomenal and semantic patterns of interrelationship -- inform us of the actual furniture of the world by a qualitative delineation of a significant segment of experience we encounter within it (Polanyi, 1967, p. 13).

The paradigm for this construal of tacit knowing -- and the central importance attached to it -- is our body.

Our body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical. In all our waking moments we are relying on our awareness of contacts of our body with things outside for attending to these things. Our own body is the only thing in the world which we normally never experience as an object, but experience always in terms of the world to which we are attending from our body. It is by making this intelligent use of our body that we feel it to be our body, and not a thing outside (Polanyi, 1967, pp. 15-16).

By way of extension of this insight, Polanyi says that when we make something function as the proximal term of tacit knowing "we incorporate it in our body -- or extend our body to include it -- so that we come to dwell in it." It is in this manner that Polanyi comes to assimilate the teaching of one of the foremost theorists of German historical method as it applies to intellectual history, Wilhelm Dilthey (Hodges, 1944)². Dilthey believed that the mind of a person could be understood only through a process of reenactment -- "by reliving its workings." Polanyi regards the vocation of the intellectual historian as delineated by Dilthey -- the "indwelling" of the historian in the mind of the thinker he seeks to study -- as merely a special case of the larger phenomenon of tacit knowing, which requires a proximal term as the basis for an "indwelling" that can generate knowledge.

The same process of "indwelling" is at work in both moral knowledge and scientific understanding. Acceptance of moral teachings is sometimes described as their "interiorization." To interiorize is to identify with a

particular moral teaching to such an extent that it functions as the proximal term of a tacit moral knowledge in terms of which we structure and evaluate action. An analogous pattern of relating to phenomena is present in the case of science. To adhere to a scientific theory means a large-scale investment in a particular proximal term of tacit knowing, in relation to which a certain segment of reality will now be organized, investigated and evaluated. Thus, in both morality and science it is only through the “indwelling” that the presence or cultivation of the proximal term of tacit knowing affords that knowledge and action become possible.

The concept of “indwelling” -- the role of the proximal term of tacit knowing -- suggests that knowledge is exploratory not only in terms of its ground (of how it gets initiated and organized) but also in terms of its end (in relation to more ultimate patterns of coherence). If we are able to know only through “indwelling” in the proximal term of tacit knowing, then what we learn on any one occasion can have only a limited, provisional character, dependent upon what the particular tacit background is to our act of knowing and which intimation we pursue from within that background. The acquisition of knowledge therefore presupposes commitment to a particular proximal term and to the “mining” of its “vein” over a sustained period. “You cannot formalize the act of commitment,” Polanyi writes, “for you cannot express your commitment non-committally. To attempt this is to exercise the kind of lucidity which destroys its subject matter. Hence the failure of the positivist movement in the philosophy of science” (1967, p.25).

Polanyi’s arguments in defense of a tacit dimension to knowledge can be supplemented by arguments of a distinctively philosophical character found in Plato. These arguments are present mainly in the *Phaedrus*, with the *Meno* and the *Republic* serving as two important additional sources. A built-in limitation of written discourse, which extends to spoken discourse as well (except that which exhibits a special character, to be discussed shortly) is its giving rise to an infinite regress of interpretation. Thus, from the *Phaedrus*, (Plato, 1956, pp. 69-70):

SOCR. They must be really ignorant of Zeus Ammon’s method of delivering prophetic truth if they believe that words put in writing are something more than what they are in fact: a reminder to a man, already conversant with the subject, of the material with which the writing is concerned.

PHAEDR. Quite right.

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SOCR. Writing, you know, Phaedrus, has this strange quality about it, which makes it really like a painting: the painter's products stand before us quite as though they were alive; but if you question them, they maintain a solemn silence. So, too, written words: you might think they spoke as though they made sense, but if you ask them anything about what they are saying, if you wish an explanation, they go on telling you the same thing, over and over forever. Once a thing is put in writing, it rolls about all over the place, falling into the hands of those who have no concern with it just as easily as under the notice of those who comprehend; it has no notion of whom to address or to avoid. And when it is ill-treated or abused as illegitimate, it always needs its father to help it, being quite unable to protect or help itself.

PHAEDR. You're right about that, too.

SOCR. Well then, are we able to imagine another sort of discourse, a legitimate brother of our bastard? How does it originate? How far is it better and more powerful in nature?

PHAEDR. What sort of discourse? What do you mean about its origin?

SOCR. A discourse which is inscribed with genuine knowledge in the soul of the learner; a discourse that can defend itself and knows to whom it should speak and before whom to remain silent.

PHAEDR. Do you mean the living, animate discourse of a man who really knows? Would it be fair to call the written discourse only a kind of ghost of it?

SOCR. Precisely.

Given the unavoidable ambiguities of discourse -- the open texture of language giving rise to multiple possibilities of meaning -- how is meaning to be pinned down? How is one person reliably to ascertain what another is

trying to communicate? If one were to say that alongside each text there should be formulated another accompanying interpretive text, to clarify the ambiguities present in the primary text, the same problem would emerge to affect the interpretive text as undermined the original text. The interpretive text would also of necessity be couched in language, with its attendant ambiguity and multivalence. To the extent that the primary text defied precise translation, so would the interpretive text. The same logical formalistic problem would reappear no matter how frequently the interpretive texts were multiplied, or how precise and detailed they were made to appear.

Following Polanyi, one might say that the solution to this problem of an infinite regress of interpretation is to postulate an additional dimension of discourse beyond that which is explicitly formulated. It is only by acknowledging a tacit dimension that we are able to resolve the problem of an infinite regress of interpretation. Our philosophy of discourse has to make allowances for processes of comprehension that transcend the purely verbal (to use Polanyi's idiom), the presence of a proximal term to knowing that facilitates the distal term coming into focus, in order for us to make sense out of the communication of information and ideas and the transmission of knowledge.

In the passage quoted, Plato refers to a "living, animate discourse" which is to be contrasted with the ordinary discourse whose naive presuppositions he is criticizing. What I think he has in mind here, and what he develops more fully in the *Republic*, is the notion of dialectic (or dialectical discourse) as the appropriate corrective to the inherent limitations of ordinary discourse. To engage in dialectical discourse is to attempt to purge ordinary discourse of its usually suppressed presuppositions and implications in order to reach the humanly approachable limit of totally self-aware discourse. "The method of dialectic is the only one which takes this course, doing away with assumptions and travelling up to the first principle of all, so as to make sure of confirmation there" (Plato, 1975, p. 254). Plato, in the passage cited above, offers us the infinite regress argument by way of undermining the legitimacy of ordinary discourse naively understood as a medium for communicating knowledge and truth. Dialectic becomes a rationalistic surrogate for tacit knowing, but the arguments in its defense are precisely those needed to render plausible the concept of tacit knowing.

Another argument in favor of tacit knowing is suggested by the following discussion in the *Phaedrus*:

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SOCR. Tell me now: suppose someone were to go to your friend *Eryximachus* or his father *Acumenus* and say to them, "I know how to apply such and such to bodies so as to reduce a fever or, if I wish, to lower a temperature. If the fancy takes me, I can make them vomit or, again, move their bowels, and so forth and so on. Since I have this knowledge I claim that I am a physician and can make the same of any other man to whom I communicate this knowledge." What do you think they would reply?

PHAEDR. Surely they would ask if the fellow also knew who it was that ought to be treated and the proper occasion for each treatment and how far it should proceed.

SOCR. And what if the man replied, "not at all. Yet I expect anyone who has studied these questions under my tutelage to be able by himself to do what you are asking about."

PHAEDR. I imagine they would say that the fellow was crazy, that because he had read something in a book or came across some old nostrums, he fancied himself a physician, though he knew nothing of the art of healing. (Plato, 1956, p. 58).

When we try philosophically to account for how a translation between theory and practice becomes possible, we encounter a variation of the infinite regress problem. How is a translation between theory and practice effected? The proliferation of more and more theoretical texts -- each attempting to be more comprehensive than its predecessors in the detail and specificity of its practical application -- will not solve the problem. No event in practical life presents itself to us in a sufficiently pre-packaged, pre-delineated fashion so as to facilitate a translation of textbook precepts into immediate recipes for action. The gap between theory and practice can never be closed from the side of theory. It can only be bridged from the side of practice by philosophically postulating a tacit dimension to knowledge which enables the individual actor to draw inferences and make judgments whose epistemological warrant cannot be fully theoretically certified.

An additional aspect of tacit knowledge is suggested by the following passage in the *Phaedrus*:

SOCR. Every great art must be supplemented by leisurely discussion, by stargazing, if you will, about the nature of things. This kind of discussion seems somehow or other to be the source of the characteristic we are looking for: that loftiness of mind that by all means and at all times strives to attain perfection. It was this that Pericles acquired to supplement his great natural talents. I fancy that he happened to meet in Anaxagoras a man already endowed with such a trait; that when he had had his fill of stargazing and had reached a concept of the nature of intelligence and conscious design -- topics that Anaxagoras used to discuss constantly -- he was able to derive from this discussion and to apply to his own rhetorical art what was applicable to it (Plato, 1956, pp. 60-61).

Plato seems to be suggesting in this paragraph that there was a whole tacit dimension that nurtured Pericles' mastery of the practical arts of rhetoric and statesmanship, and that in Pericles' case this tacit dimension received support from his relationship with the metaphysician Anaxagoras. Mastery of an art or a craft can be viewed as a concentrated distal moment that derives part of its sustenance from contact with the proximal moment, the tacit framework of understanding, that lends point and relevance to the enterprise in which one is engaged. Expertise in a particular field of activity should be viewed as an abstraction that in order to be rendered concrete needs to be connected with a never-fully-articulated appreciation of where the particular activity fits in one's sense of life as a whole.

Tacit knowing is again evinced in the following passage:

SOCR. Since it is in fact the function of speech to influence souls, a man who is going to be a speaker must know how many types of souls there are. Let us, then, state that they are of this or that number and of this or that sort, so that individuals also will be of this or that type. Again, the distinctions that apply here apply as well in the case of speeches: they are of this or that number in type, and each type is of one particular sort. So men of a special sort under the influence of speeches of a particular kind are readily persuaded to take action of a definite sort because of the qualitative correlation that obtains between speech and

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soul: while men of a different sort are hard to persuade because, in their case, this qualitative correlation does not obtain. Very well. When a student has attained an adequate grasp of these facts intellectually, he must next go on to see with his own eyes that they occur in the world of affairs and are operative in practice; he must acquire the capacity to confirm their existence through the sharp use of his senses. If he does not do this, no part of the theoretical knowledge he acquired as a student is as yet of any help to him. But it is only when he can state adequately what sort of man is persuaded by what sort of speech; when he has the capacity to declare himself with complete perception, in the presence of another, that there is the man and here the nature that was discussed theoretically at school -- here, now, present to him in actuality -- to which he must apply this kind of speech in this sort of manner in order to obtain persuasion for this kind of activity -- it is only when he can do all this and when he has, in addition, grasped the concept of propriety of time -- when to speak and when to hold his tongue, when to use and when not to use brachylogy, piteous language, hyperbole for horrific effect, and in a word, each of the specific devices of discourse he may have studied -- it is only then, and not until then, that the finishing and perfecting touches will have been given to his science. But if in a man's speaking or teaching or writing he falls short in any one of these respects, he may indeed claim that he speaks by the rules of the art; but anyone who doesn't believe him is a better man than he is (Plato, 1956, pp. 63-64).

Aside from alluding again more generally to the phenomenon of translation of theory into practice, which requires the invocation of tacit knowing in order to be rendered philosophically intelligible, Plato in this passage points to the specific theme of appropriateness -- of knowing when to speak and when to remain silent, and of matching styles of discourse to the nature of the audience one is addressing -- as an additional factor denoting the opacity of ordinary discourse. The exercise of judgment and connoisseurship in relation to one's audience constitute the proximal moments out of which the distal moment of discourse emerges. All of the formally expressed protocols in the world concerning appropriateness would

not do as a philosophically convincing notion of how discourse functions because we would still be faced with the problem of explaining how the gap between theory and practice had been bridged.

There is also a problem of circularity which affects the choice of criteria utilized in judgment. Unless a sense of discernment and judgment are antecedently regarded as being present, these criteria will not make sense. The criteria of judgment have to be assumed before they can be postulated in order for their postulation to seem convincing. As we have seen, the most plausible strategy for avoiding both a vicious circle and an infinite regress at this point is to postulate a dimension of tacit knowing. It is this element that helps to make sense of the fact that discourse must "know" a lot more than it officially states in order for it to function as an adequate vehicle of communication.

Further support for the doctrine of tacit knowing is provided by Plato's *Meno*:

MEN. And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of inquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?

SOCR. I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that a man cannot inquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to inquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to inquire (1949, p. 36).

Plato argues that the traditional method for resolving perplexity by proceeding from problem to solution -- engaging in the activities of problem-formulation and problem-solution -- rests upon a paradox. One either knows what one is looking for or one does not. If one knows what one is looking for, then the statement of the problem is pointless. If one does not know what one is looking for then a delineation of a problem becomes impossible.

Plato attempts to resolve this paradox by postulating the doctrine that "all inquiry and all learning is but recollection" (1949, p. 37). The very identification and diagnosis of this meta-theoretical problem, however, is suggestive of the scope of tacit knowledge in our intellectual activities. It is just the vocabulary of "proximal" and "distal," or an equivalent set of terms,

that is lacking in Plato. The prefiguration of directions in which to look for solutions to a problem which guides the formulation of the problem in the first place constitutes so many proximal moments which facilitate the articulation of the distal moment. One might even go far as to say that Plato's notion of learning as recollection, aside from relating on the literal level to his doctrine of the transmigration of souls (1975, pp. 348-359), can also be interpreted as a metaphoric expression of the concept of tacit knowing. When one philosophically analyzes what takes place in the activities of intellectual inquiry and learning, these activities appear senseless without the prior postulation of a series of proximal moments which guide and limit inquiry. Plato terms these proximal moments "recollection," but "recollection," one could say, simply refers to what has to be presupposed in order to render the current discourse intelligible.

Polanyi, taking his cue from Plato's discussion of the paradox of knowledge in the *Meno*, points to an additional ramification of tacit knowing. The term needs to be construed prospectively, as well as retrospectively. It is not just when as philosophical spectators we attempt to unravel a particular knowledge claim that we need to postulate a dimension of tacit knowing in order to make sense out of the claim. It is also the case that as actors attempting to expand the horizons of knowledge by resolving current perplexities we proceed through cultivation of "a tacit foreknowledge of yet undiscovered things" (Polanyi, 1967, p. 23).

It appears, then, that to know that a statement is true is to know more than we can tell and that hence, when a discovery solves a problem, it is itself fraught with further intimations of an indeterminate range, and that furthermore, when we accept the discovery as true, we commit ourselves to a belief in all these as yet undisclosed, perhaps as yet unthinkable, consequences. (Polanyi, 1967, p. 23).

There are striking parallels between Polanyi's conception of the growth of knowledge and Kuhn's notion of how scientific advance always proceeds within the predetermined limits set by a large-scale paradigm. What Kuhn evinces as a sociological discovery about the way that individual scientific communities are structured -- that they work in a highly conservative manner, pursuing the intimations of the reigning paradigms of their communities -- is viewed by Polanyi as a necessary condition for the growth of knowledge generally. In the building up of knowledge, it is never a question of adding

the previously totally unknown to the already understood and assimilated. The growth of knowledge proceeds, rather, in a circular manner where, capitalizing upon the potential of the not-yet-fully-disclosed in what we conventionally take to be the already known, we generate a series of proximal moments which issue forth in more precise "distal" crystallizations of what we previously merely had a "tacit knowledge." "The pursuit of discovery," Polanyi says, "is conducted from the start in these terms; all the time we are guided by sensing the presence of a hidden reality toward which our clues are pointing; and the discovery which terminates and satisfies this pursuit is still sustained by the same vision. It claims to have made contact with reality: a reality which, being real, may yet reveal itself to future eyes in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations" (1967, p. 24).

To the extent that Kuhn, in the centrality that he assigns to paradigms in the structure of science, is making a philosophical point and not just a sociological one, the convergence of Kuhn with Polanyi runs even deeper. If there never is under any paradigmatic dispensation, ancient or modern, a perfect fit between a paradigm and the facts that it seeks to explain and predict (Kuhn, 1970, p. 208), then the conservative bias of scientific communities is not just a function of sociological convenience -- one does not need to continually redesign the socializing mechanisms of a scientific community -- but is a matter of intellectual necessity. If there is no one-to-one correlation between particular components of a theory and individual facts or regions of fact,³ then the best way to ensure the ordered development of new facts and the disciplined testing of old facts is by retaining allegiance to a particular paradigm over an extended period of time. In order to have an ordered, cumulative, progressive universe to inhabit, we need to adhere conservatively to individual paradigms in the sciences for as long as possible. Both the lack of perfect fit between theory and fact that Kuhn talks about and the tacit dimension of knowledge (with perpetual movement from proximal "reserves" of cues to distal crystallizations) that Polanyi describes enable us to recognize and better comprehend the elements of the "made" in the "given."

A further epistemological argument for postulating a tacit dimension to knowledge is suggested by Plato's Theory of Ideas. This familiar theory relegates the facts of the material world to an inferior ontological status, regarding them as mere copies of eternal Forms. This formulation can be construed as a metaphoric and picturesque way of stating that so-called facts are theory-dependent, that the world of theory is underdetermined by the universe of fact. An analogous point is suggested by Plato's labeling the highest form of knowledge the Good, rather than the True -- with the True

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being a derivative form of knowledge from the Good. Plato perhaps means to suggest by this terminology the subordination of epistemology to ethics. There is an irreducible contingency in our categories of knowledge which can only be removed by placing them in the perspective afforded by our ethical categories, which decree that the particular ordering of truth and reality made possible and validated by our epistemological categories is good.⁴

Implications and Applications

To the extent that Platonic teaching is communicated through the medium of dramatic clashes taking place within the dialogue rather than being directly identifiable with any one position espoused by any participant, the role of tacit knowledge becomes even more manifest. If Plato's message is to some extent a function of his medium, the dialogue form is uniquely structured to provide the reader with a shifting array of proximal and distal poles that yield unsuspected ironies and disclosures. If the dialogue form is meant to highlight the extent to which Socrates and Thrasymachus are both right in their approaches to justice -- with, in each case, Thrasymachus's position serving as a proximal pole in order to be better able to appreciate the justice of Socrates' position, and Socrates' position serving as a proximal pole to be better able to elicit the appropriateness of Thrasymachus's position -- then one could say that Socrates provides us with the ur-agent's perspective on justice and Thrasymachus gives us the ur-spectator's perspective on justice. To be an agent -- an actor -- in the world means that regardless of one's personal temperament and predilections one is engaging in activities that suggest that it is possible to change things for the better. To inhabit the role of actor means to deploy a set of assumptions and prospects that focus on the possibility of human improvement. Socrates, then, provides us with a delineation of justice from the perspective of an agent, as well as the formal properties of the role of an agent.

Thrasymachus, by contrast, defines for us what it means to be a spectator concerning justice. To be a spectator means to adopt a deflationary perspective towards the phenomena one is observing. It is to discount the pretensions and the self-characterizations of the actors one is studying, and to invoke more realistic standards of assessment than actors are prone to mobilize in their own behalf.

To be fully human means that one perennially has to shift from being an agent to being a spectator, and back again. People learn to cultivate the spectator stance not only in relation to other peoples' performances, but concerning their own actions as well. The full Platonic teaching, therefore, is

addressed to instructing us how to play both roles. A just life and a just society consist in the formation of individuals who can absorb the transitional tensions involved in shifting from one role to the other.

Taking the dialogue form of the *Republic* seriously as a communicator of meaning, and reading the work in a skeptical light, suggests further ironic possibilities in juxtaposing Socrates with Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus's enterprise appears radically self-defeating. By postulating a pragmatic, rather than a cognitive, foundation for justice, doesn't it make the most sense to promulgate natural law absolutes within one's society, and for people to collectively act as if they were true? Doesn't it lead to the least exploitation, the least "injustice" by a common, intuitively accepted standard? So might not one say that if Thrasymachus is right about the pragmatic foundation of justice, then he is wrong in his conclusion? Might it not be the case, therefore, that Plato, the philosopher, on the surface arguing against skepticism, is philosophically wrong but pragmatically right, while Thrasymachus, the pragmatist, scornful of the claims of philosophy, is philosophically right but pragmatically wrong? Each protagonist in the dialogue would then be right in the area that matters least to him. This very formulation, if it seems at all correct, would provide a vindication of tacit knowledge. The concept of tacit knowledge reminds us that the ironic shadow cast by a particular statement, which reflects the sense in which the statement remains connected with the "proximal" pole of discourse, might be more "true" than a literal construal of the statement itself.

Once we recognize Plato's case for regarding explicit knowledge as an inadequate vehicle for formulating and communicating knowledge and truth, new light is cast on the totalitarianism issue in the *Republic*. To begin with, the perspective of tacit knowledge -- that a proximal pole is necessary to generate and justify knowledge -- reveals an unexpected irony in the structuring of Plato's argument. If one juxtaposes Plato's attack against the poets with his endorsement of the theoretical vocation -- and uses the former as a "proximal" pole from which to launch a deeper reading of the latter -- a less totalitarian gloss emerges. There is an ambiguity surrounding Plato's ultimate commitment. Is it to theorizing, to the pursuit of interconnections as an activity which is literally endless, all resting-places being merely temporary and provisional in character, a result of flagging energies, or is Plato's ultimate commitment to a specific content yielded by theoretical activity, i.e., the substantive theory of justice outlined in the pages of the *Republic*? Plato's opposition to the poets suggests that the former is the case, rather than the latter. In many key respects, poetry -- and artistic creation generally -- resemble theoretical activity, in that they each involve the pursuit

of interconnections. A major difference between theoretical activity and artistic endeavor is the degree of self-consciousness evinced at each stage in the fashioning of the final product, philosophical argument or work of art. The appeal at all stages in the elaboration of a philosophical argument is to neutral, impersonal criteria of inference and judgment, whereas in artistic activity the connections are mainly drawn intuitively and unconsciously.

However, as we have seen, Plato would acknowledge that the rules in accordance with which transitions in philosophical argument are negotiated are not ironclad, but are, to some extent, fluid and discretionary in character. Theories are underdetermined by facts, so that logical connectives between different layers of theoretical statement as well as the pattern of inference leading from a certain structuring of the facts to a particular articulation of theory are all equally underdetermined by facts.

The juxtaposition which lauds theoretical activity while castigating the work of the poets, therefore, tells us that there might not be something genuine in the offensive against the poets. Theory as intellectual product which issues forth in a close monitoring of the poets might not represent a settled Platonic conviction, but is inserted for more exigent reasons relating to the particular sensibilities of Plato's immediate audience. The defense of the philosophical vocation might be intended to contain and drastically limit the implications of Plato's attack against the poets. The tacit knowledge present in the interstices of the argument of the *Republic* itself might subvert a literal reading of it.⁵

The Allegory of the Cave captures most fully the relationship between philosophy and tacit knowledge and the political implications that follow from that relationship. If pursuit of philosophical reasoning eventuates in an enhanced appreciation of the role of tacit knowledge, then philosophical reasoning itself ends up in a movement of recoil rejecting philosophy and recommending the sphere of action as the appropriate arena for the mobilization and investment of human energies. If pushing philosophical argument to its furthest possible reaches leads to a recognition of how limited, submerged and contextual the bases of justification are, then the Allegory of the Cave suggests that Plato might be willing to take the additional step of declaring that the realm of philosophy itself, by probing human limits, ends up experiencing their impact more fully than non-philosophical domains of inquiry and can therefore paradoxically point to the realm of action as the most appropriate setting for the deployment of human energies.

Almost after the manner of Santayana (1935, p. 6), one could say that the Allegory of the Cave captures Plato's sense of why on philosophical

grounds one is misguided to be a philosopher. The philosopher returns to the realm of shadows, to the cave, not just because he seeks to be a public benefactor or because he declines to be ruled by someone inferior to himself but also because this return is a central part of his communion with the blazing sun (the realm of Ideas) and, especially, the highest idea (the Form of Goodness). The ethical implications of remaining permanently open to new possibilities and never losing sight of the provisional character of justification, the conceptual core of tacit knowledge, propel one in the direction of practice, and more specifically in the direction of practice where openness and provisionality can become institutionalized and transmitted as a cultural inheritance.⁶

Further, a most odious totalitarian feature of the *Republic*, the medicinal lies, are not a deliberate instrumentality of the ruling class to deceive and dominate the lower class. They are rather a response to a metaphysical dilemma which affects the philosopher-kings as much as it does the artisans. The irremediable opacity of discourse can be mitigated in the confines of the Guardian class by the close bonds that prevail between philosophical masters and philosophical initiates which enable the initiates to absorb the tacit dimensions of knowledge (which are communicated in the interstices of conversation) in pauses, silences, omissions and gestures. Perhaps it is the necessary exclusion of the masses from this form of relationship that necessitates resort to medicinal lies.

Also, various lacunae in the *Republic* testify to the indispensability of the theorist to effect an appropriate translation of theory into practice. The theorist as the living embodiment of tacit knowledge facilitates the smoothest possible transition between theoretical vision and concrete reality. For example, Plato's *Republic* is replete with discussion of mechanisms designed to ensure the stability of the class structure. These include eugenics, censorship of literature and the arts, a stratified educational system and the myth of the metals. Nevertheless, there is only minimal confrontation as an analytically distinct question of how the original division into classes is to be accomplished. Presumably, the judgement of the theorist would be crucial for yielding a just initial distribution into classes that would then be preserved through the methods Plato so amply describes.

And while Plato is relatively silent on exigencies arising in the future, primarily disturbances of an international sort, the philosophical sensibility which is imbued with an awareness of, and responsiveness to, the teachings of tacit knowledge is ideally suited to fill this gap. The philosophical elite that received training in the processes of tacit knowing (through the cultivation of dialectic) understands how the proximal and distal poles of knowledge stand

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in a dynamic relation to each other, so that the “distal” crystallization of one moment of action or insight becomes the “proximal” submerged pole, sending off cues which help to orient us in a future situation. With their appreciation of the role of tacit knowledge, the philosopher-kings are in an ideal position to respond purposefully to new events if, and when, they arise.

Conclusion: Skepticism And Tacit Knowledge

Tacit knowledge offers a resolution of the problem of formulating a non-self-refuting version of skepticism. If arguments in favor of extreme skepticism such as those adduced from Plato seem convincing, and yet extreme skepticism cannot be stated without also negating itself, then the solution lies in our acknowledging that we have reached a limit of thought. This means that extreme skepticism has to be seen as a “proximal” pole that enables us to do certain things in the world -- such as Plato’s philosopher-kings imbibing from it the daring to fashion a new mode of coordinated societal living. Tacit knowledge “dissolves” skepticism as an issue in philosophy because it places it in a context where our paradigms of knowledge are statements that are more “knowing’ than anything they can directly justify. Skepticism, too, paradoxically has to be believed before it can be known.

What makes the modern age so resistant to this solution of the problem of skepticism is that what chiefly characterizes the modern age in contrast to the epochs that preceded it is a proliferation of the phenomenon of self-consciousness. A major difference between antiquity and modernity is the dispersion of the activities and products of elite consciousness, such as Plato’s skepticism, among a broad mass of the population, so that what in previous ages constituted a rigid distinction between elite and mass consciousness becomes blurred as modernity advances. It is not the content of speculation and insight that distinguishes the modern age from those that preceded it, but rather its diffusion among the masses.

Incipient self-consciousness makes tacit knowledge appear archaic and obscurantist. And yet an overweening self-consciousness that considers itself part of the solution and refuses to see itself as part of the problem merely intensifies the problem. The moral and epistemological conundrums that are generated by a skepticism that continually calls itself into question at the same time that it attacks everything else gives rise to the phenomenon of thought not being able to certify action and of action being disjointed from thought. The distinctive cultural style of modernity is irredeemably

schizophrenic, juxtaposing an “extreme critical lucidity” and “an intense moral conscience” that never seem to coalesce (Polanyi, 1967, p. 4).

Given the pervasiveness of self-consciousness, whereas it was once a symbol that might have saved us, it is now a form of activity. The concept of God as the ground of being serves as an ultimate reminder of the tacit structuring of knowledge. An unfathomable God, when widely accepted, functions as a kind of cosmic “proximal” pole underscoring the partial, limited scope of justification in knowledge and in action. The heightened self-consciousness of modernity, however, seems to place a premium on a form of activity as a fitting restorative mechanism for the modern astigmatism.

Creating more and more societal frameworks where human beings can participate in the decisions that affect their lives presents the most valid promise of wholeness that modernity can offer. Participation helps all to see that in a very real sense it is the future which determines the past, with each contribution by a member of a particular participatory network on either the level of thought or action being held hostage by later developments and later fusions with the thoughts and actions of others.

Participation on the specifically political level of decisionmaking (which today includes such historic preserves of private decisionmaking as the workplace) also affords human beings access to the only kind of objectivity which they seem capable of attaining. If tacit knowledge teaches us that knowing is inseparable from doing, then the more grandiose the doing, the more secure the knowing. By collectively inhabiting a natural world and deliberately fashioning together social and political ones, we are granted new access to the givens of our lives through the agency of what we collectively create. Political participation in a broad sense makes us more reliable trustees for the human and natural orders -- the permanently present and never fully-fathomable “proximal” poles that facilitate our “distal” creativeness.

NOTES

1. Michael Oakeshott and Sheldon Wolin have both emphasized the role of tacit knowledge in illuminating the vocation of the political theorist and in the construal of particular theoretical texts. See especially Oakeshott (1962, pp. 1-36; 111-136), and Wolin (Fleisher, 1972, pp. 23-75; Wolin, 1960, pp. 1-27). Neither Oakeshott nor Wolin,

however, has systematically sought to relate the theme of tacit knowledge to a reading of Plato.

2. There are important affinities between Dilthey's conception of the activity of the intellectual historian and Collingwood's (Collingwood, 1963). For a discussion of the presuppositions and limitations of Collingwood's ideas concerning historical method, see Botwinick (1981).
3. The bias against rationalistic advance implicit in Kuhn's argument has been subject to sharp attack. See Scheffler (1967) and Lakatos and Musgrave (1970).
4. The relative autonomy of theory in relation to fact is also reflected in the Myth of Er concerning the immortality of the soul with which Plato concludes the *Republic* (1975, pp. 348-359), which depicts man as a creature of nearly total self-determination: "But in none of these lives," says Plato, "was there anything to determine the condition of the soul, because the soul must needs change its character accordingly as it chooses one life or another" (Plato, 1975, p. 356).
5. The conclusion reached here concerning an antitotalitarian reading of the *Republic* bears certain affinities with the approaches taken by Allan Bloom in his introductory essay to his edition of the *Republic* (Bloom, 1968) and by Leo Strauss (1964). Nevertheless, the largely epistemologically-grounded arguments invoked in the text to defend this position distinguish my approach from that of Strauss and Bloom.
6. Strauss identifies many of the key elements in the economy of Plato's argument that I do, but does not perceive their interrelationship -- or draw out their implications -- in the same way. In Strauss's view, Plato remains steadfastly loyal to the philosophical vocation and rejects the claims of politics. For a final restatement of Strauss's position, see his posthumously published, *Studies in Platonic Philosophy* (1983).

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