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Knowledge and what it says on the tin: Response to Moodey

Harry Collins

The problem I am having is that it all seems terribly simple. Knowledge is stuff that pools in different places. Think of it like paint – red paint in this tin, blue paint in that tin, green paint in that tin. Take a human and dip it in one tin and it will come out red, dip it in another tin and it will come out blue and so on. The tins are, of course, societies and, of course, societies are more complicated than tins of paint: for one thing society-tins are found at a hugely different scales – some tins being enormous and some being very small. Worse, in the weird multi-dimensional space in which society-type tins exist, tins are found inside other tins are found inside other tins and it is possible humans get dipped into lots of tins at all the different scales at once: this is the fractal model of societies. What you get is that each human winds up coloured by all the different paints it has been dipped into – English speaker, cricketer, Christian, gravitational wave physicist, and so on.

As for the paint, it is knowledge. Because it is knowledge it has other funny properties. One of these properties is that it is colourless until you dip a human into it – it is the kind of paint that only reveals its colour when it is painted on humans – like, say, litmus paper going red or blue when dipped into some colourless liquid that turns out to have been acid or alkali; that is what is meant by saying that humans are the only knowers even though the locus of knowledge is the tin. The locus of knowledge is the tin but if you want to know what colour it is you have to look at a human that's been dipped in it. That makes a little bit of sense even in the case of paint because we don't say of a tin of red

paint that it is a red tin or of a tin of blue paint that it is a blue tin: we don't confuse the colour *in* the tin with the colour *of* the tin. That's like saying societies are the locus of knowledge but they are not knowers and do not engage in acts of knowing.

This isn't just a fancy metaphor it is how life works. Consider natural languages. My two new grandchildren are being brought up in England and their natural language as they grow will be English. Neither of them are intending to learn English – learning English is not an 'action' for them. By the time they know a lot of English they probably will not even know that they know English; they may not even know that they know a language.

Maybe later in life they will *intend* to learn French and among their actions will be going to French classes. This kind of knowing is different – it is intentional. It may be that this kind knowing is what gives rise to a lot of the complication because it is taken to give rise to the paradigm of knowing – knowing being a kind of 'formally expressible' thing like long-division or working out $E=Mc^2$ which operates in a self-conscious, active, kind of way. But this is not the kind of knowing that we are talking about here because what we are debating is collective tacit knowledge and its locus. This other kind of more active knowledge is also dealt with in my book, *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge*, but it belongs on the explicit side and is not simple to understand. In spite of writing half a book about explicit knowledge I still do not understand it. But, as far as I can see, I do understand collective tacit knowledge. We need to make collective tacit knowledge the paradigm and launch ourselves into the analysis of explicit knowledge – this more formal kind of stuff – from there, not the other way round.

Now, notice, maybe my grandchildren when they grow up and decide to learn French in that more formal kind of way will come to realise that if they are to become fluent in the language – knowing it as more than a set of grammatical rules and definitions – they had better spend some time living in France among French people; their act then will be one of immersing themselves in the ‘tin’ of French language. The act will be intentional but the painting with French colour will not be series of intentional acts but a process of absorbing the colour without being aware of the details of its happening.

We could go through this whole story again with native cuisine instead of language. If you want a really good Italian meal go to Italy (it really is different), or go to an area in another country where a large group of Italian immigrants live, or go to an individual restaurant run by an newly immigrant Italian family – but in the later case you can guarantee that the quality won’t last more than at most a generation – the paint will wear off and be replaced by the colouring of the new society (not to mention the problems of culinary infrastructure). What you get after a generation is the culinary equivalent of cargo-cult language.

With knowledge you have this additional complexity – already hinted at with cooking – of the relationship between the linguistic and the practical aspects of the knowledge – that is the idea of interactional expertise and its powers. All these complexities are being analysed and written about – for a recent summary of some of them see Collins’s, 2016, ‘Studies of Expertise and Experience’ *Topoi* (doi:10.1007/s11245-016-9412-1). It all seems so simple to me that I worry that the complexities are being generated by the determination to use words in ways that have arisen out of the philosophical tradition

rather than thinking about how things work. The philosophical tradition seems to be informed by a rather old-fashioned model of knowledge that is based in the explicit; the way the world works is based on the tacit.