This book began as an attempt to put my earlier studies of tacit knowledge together in a coherent way. I thought it would be easy, but I soon found that rather than having my arms around the whole subject, my grip was precarious. I am not the only one who thinks the existing literature on tacit knowledge is less than clear. The confusions are found in all the disciplines that take tacit knowledge to be part of their concern, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, artificial intelligence, economics, and management. This book is, first, an attempt to resolve these confusions and, second, with the resolution in hand, an attempt to produce the coherent account of tacit knowledge. It can also be seen as a foundation for the tacit knowledge–based Periodic Table of Expertises Robert Evans and I set out in *Rethinking Expertise* (2007) and as a setting for the more detailed analysis of the notion of polimorphic and mimeomorphic actions found in my and Martin Kusch’s *The Shape of Actions* (1998). Thus, this book amounts to the completion of a three-book project to analyze knowledge from “top to bottom”—from the nature of expertise to the nature of actions, with the nature of tacit knowledge in the conceptual middle.

Polimorphic actions are actions that can only be executed successfully by a person who understands the social context. Copying the visible behavior that is the counterpart of an observed action is unlikely to reproduce the action unless it is a mimeomorphic action, because in the case of polimorphic actions, the right behavioral instantiation will change with context. Here it will be concluded that, for now and the foreseeable future, polimorphic actions—and only polimorphic actions—remain outside the domain of the explicable, whichever of the four possible ways “explicable” is defined. This has significance for the success of different kinds of machine and for the way we teach. If we are ever to make the tacit knowledge associ-
ated with polimorphic actions explicit, such that we could build machines that can mimic polimorphic actions, then what I will call “the socialization problem” will have to be solved first.

The argument set out here begins with the claim that existing treatments of tacit knowledge are unclear about what is meant by the terms “tacit” and “explicit.” It is also argued that while it is true that all explicit knowledge rests on tacit knowledge, we would have no concept of the tacit without the explicit. The second argument is that existing work fails to separate three phenomena, all known as tacit knowledge, which are quite different and which I refer to as weak, medium, and strong tacit knowledge. These have to do, respectively, with the contingencies of social life (relational tacit knowledge), the nature of the human body and brain (somatic tacit knowledge), and the nature of human society (collective tacit knowledge)—RTK, STK, and CTK. It is CTK that requires a solution to the socialization problem if it is to be explicated. The experience of the individual who is learning something new usually involves elements of all three—though not necessarily in sequence—and the resulting “Three Phase Model,” I suggest, is more fundamental and general in its reach than previous approaches. The experience of the individual, however, unless examined with analytic determination, is pretty much the same whichever of the three types of tacit knowledge is being encountered, and acquiring all of the types is often part of the same learning experience; that is why existing analyses work reasonably well when they address narrow problems and why it has not been noticed that very different things are being talked about. It is, nevertheless, vital to separate these different kinds of tacit knowledge if mistakes are to be avoided when the gaze is lifted and more ambitious problems and projects are addressed.

Some of the components of this book have been discussed before. The distinction developed in chapters 5 and 6—the difference between the body and the collectivity—were to some extent worked out in my contribution titled “What Is Tacit Knowledge?” that was included in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (2001) and in an article published in *Organization Studies*, “Bicycling on the Moon” (2007). However, a complete classification of tacit knowledge emerged only with the idea of relational tacit knowledge, which is new to this book and arrived only with the most enormous

1. I originally called relational tacit knowledge “contingent tacit knowledge” but it later occurred that it might be useful to have distinct acronyms for the three types. “Relational” captures the idea that whether these pieces of knowledge are tacit or made explicit depends on the relation between the parties. The other two types of tacit knowledge do not become explicit when social arrangements change.
struggle. Sometimes, the simplest things are the hardest to see if one starts from the wrong position, and I now see that my *Artificial Experts* (1990) has relational tacit knowledge mixed up with other kinds of tacit knowledge. A good few of the examples used here have also been used before in *Artificial Experts, The Shape of Actions*, and other books and papers. The old examples remain well suited to make the points, and there are many new examples, too. It is only in this book that I have begun to understand exactly how they all fit together, and that is one of the main aims of the exercise.