

Knowledge management and philosophy: A position paper

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Introduction

It certainly seems appropriate to further examine the concept of *knowledge* (in the context of the current management interest in the topic of *knowledge management*) from a more philosophical perspective than has hitherto been the case. Furthermore, I would suggest that the topic of *knowledge creation* (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) seems worth exploring from a philosophical perspective also.

The “knowledge economy”

To begin with, one may begin uncritically and investigate how such concepts may be of immediate practical utility to the large corporations – an approach implied in statements such as this one by Probst *et al.*:

“The long-predicted ‘information society’ and ‘knowledge economy’ are now emerging as tangible realities. Leading management theoreticians argue that it is much more profitable for a company to invest a given sum in its knowledge assets than to spend the same amount on material assets.” (Probst *et al.*, 2000, p. 3)

Here, it would seem that *knowledge* has an entirely a positive connotation – from (what might be termed) an “enlightenment-prosperity” perspective. However, the poststructuralist perspective might also be considered with interest. Here it might be argued that the creation of knowledge is interconnected with the concrete operation of power. Knowledge creation – far from being concerned with *empowerment* – could be seen as just another development in managerial control philosophies.

“There is no denying the dominant existence today of techno-science, that is the massive subordination of cognitive statements to the finality of the best possible performance, which is the technological criterion. But the mechanical and the industrial, especially when they enter fields traditionally reserved for artists, are carrying with them much more than power effects. The objects and the thoughts that originate in scientific knowledge and the capitalist economy convey with them one of the rules which supports their possibility: the rule that there is no reality unless testified by a consensus between partners over a certain knowledge and certain commitments. This rule is of no little consequence. It is the imprint left on the politics of the scientist and the trustee of capital by a kind of flight of reality out of the metaphysical, religious and political certainties that the mind believed it held. This withdrawal is absolutely necessary to the emergence of science and capitalism.” (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 76-77).

A further contribution to this sort of debate would be to examine how knowledge creation and management could be viewed from the perspective of critical theory. Of particular interest here might be in its relationship with art and the culture industry. Indeed the terms ‘knowledge management’ and ‘the culture industry’ seem to have an immediate resonance. Why, and in what sense, do knowledge and culture need some form of active *management* (for profit?).

Tacit knowledge

Lyotard’s suggestions (dating from 1979) concerning the interconnections between science and economy can make an important bridge between the managerial (and technical) discourses of

knowledge creation and management (Lyotard, 1984). It may prove to be useful to exploit the well-worked concepts of epistemology and ontology from the analytical perspective on philosophy, as (for example) several different uses of the term *knowledge* can already be seen within the topic of *knowledge management*. To begin with, one can discern a philosophical confusion between what Popper (1979) characterised as World Two and World Three uses of the term. Roughly-speaking, World Two knowledge would be subjective knowledge and World Three would be objective knowledge. These concepts seem to map reasonably well – but not exactly - with the concepts of *tacit* and *explicit* knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Much of Lyotard’s argument seems to relate more-or-less entirely to *explicit* knowledge. To critically examine the *tacit* dimension other approaches may yield important insights, one candidate approach being that of Foucault (1982).

Conclusion

No doubt, *knowledge* (in the form of epistemology) is one of the most researched topics in philosophy. Indeed, Nonaka and Takeuchi include a short discussion of (Western) philosophical approaches to epistemology in their 1995 book. However, there is very little discussion of critical philosophical approaches in their book, or other books / journals that I have encountered in the broad topic area of *knowledge management*. It may be timely to begin to correct this “oversight”.

References

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