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INFORMATION SYSTEMS AND PHILOSOPHY: THE HOPELESS SEARCH FOR ULTIMATE FOUNDATIONS

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Abstract

Recent heightened interest in the nature of IS as a discipline and what constitutes its theoretical basis offers a novel moment to reflect upon the role of philosophical knowledge in the evolution of IS as discipline. The debate on the "IS as a discipline" has taken multiple turns as reflected in arguments around relevance vs. rigor dilemma, or what constitutes a necessary theoretical core for a discipline, how reference disciplines relate to IS, or how disciplinary identity and theoretical core and legitimacy as a discipline and theoretical core are related. One critical, but largely unrecognized aspect in these debates is the necessity to draw upon philosophical studies as they relate to the nature of scientific knowledge and its foundations. Therefore it is interesting to explore the content of the underlying philosophical argument in these debates and what role they assume to the philosophy as a field of inquiry. Reading the debates through these lenses suggests a largely confusing conclusion: on the one hand they assume that major philosophical issues around nature and progress of scientific knowledge and theories have been already been resolved, and they provide a clear foundation to decide what constitutes a good theory, or progress in the IS field; on the other hand they remain largely silent what such philosophical criteria are, and how they can be successfully established and adopted from philosophical studies into the IS field. A more surprising conclusion is that they seem to advocate a positivist, or Popperian concept of what should be the role of philosophy as a reference discipline. Philosophy should provide the ultimate language and a logic for the justification of IS knowledge. This view, as we all know, has been largely contested in the philosophy in the post modern era. Another, "postpositivist", view of the role of philosophy in the IS field would be to view it as a critical voice in a conversation about the information systems that seeks to undermine any quest for a ultimate foundation of the IS discipline. Philosophy deconstructs any language and logic that has been developed for such purposes. Some preliminary observation of how this role of the philosophy in relation to IS discipline could be played out are discussed.