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ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

We discuss the ethical implications of knowledge management practices. In examining the philosophical debate relating to the nature of knowledge, the paper recognises the potential for knowledge management to either devalue human dignity or emphasise the importance of the individual and the value of social networks. We argue, in terms of the application of choices, that the use of wisdom, as defined in Plato's essence of the doctrine of forms, would lead to a more decisive and beneficial management of knowledge, its discovery, distribution, and use. To this end we argue against the adoptions of reductionist models in organisational life, and the ethics of attempting to separate what is known from the knowing being.

Keywords: Ethics, wisdom, knowledge management, materialism

Introduction

Though not always clearly defined, the concepts of data, information, and knowledge are central to the design of the Information Systems (IS) that support organisational decisions. They represent an ascending order of complexity where data consisting of raw facts become meaningful as patterns in blocks of data and so information expressed as propositions. When propositions are meaningfully joined, as in cause-and-effect relations, knowledge is produced. When present in an information system, data and information exist without meaning; meaning becomes present only to the rational observer. Beyond these there is the further concept of wisdom. Most generally, wisdom refers to the capacity of decision-makers to recognise and apply values in such a humane way that human beings and their environment flourish. Thus, wisdom also includes an awareness of the inestimable dignity of each human person beyond reason or merit, possessing inalienable rights, being ends in themselves, and experiencing inner lives rich in feelings, memories, thoughts and emotions.

For organisations, knowledge becomes apparent when individuals or groups frequently take actions in response to situations with which they are confronted and achieve desirable outcomes. The time and space in which individuals come to appreciate the objects that make up our world, is unique. It is this contextual dimension in which information is received, utilised, and reflected on that gives rise to knowledge. Sharing these experiences effectively however is problematic due mainly to difficulties in expressing ourselves within the constraints of our language. How we create the spaces in which sharing of experiences occurs and what we do with the knowledge, is a question of wisdom (and therefore ethics).

The paper argues for the place of ethics in order to avoid potentially humanly devaluing philosophies underlying the adoption of knowledge management practices. While no one would deny an organisation the right to manage explicit knowledge (this should be embedded in organisational processes), an employee's tacit knowledge should not be viewed as productive potential separate from the individual. Knowledge management practices emphasise the importance of the role of people but even when taking an ethically neutral stance, discuss resistance to participate in the sharing of what is known as a cultural defect to be overcome (Zack, 1999¹). The practices of most concern however are those that are those grounded in a functionalist view of the organisation and organisational processes. In exploring the philosophical underpinnings of knowledge and wisdom, this paper will discuss the ethical issues raised highlighting potential problems with the adoption of certain knowledge management practices.

¹Zack is not making a value judgement here. He is pointing out that cultural barriers will impede efforts to make knowledge explicit.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a concept originating in the ancient Near East. Egyptian examples of wisdom literature date back to 3rd millennium BC, whilst the Hebrew wisdom movement flourished under King Solomon (961-922 BC). Wisdom was thought to be an acquired quality or special kind of knowing about life's meaning applicable to the successful living of daily life and attainable by those who seek it by patient reflection on experience. In another mystical sense it is an intuitive form of knowledge beyond the effort of thought, attainable as a gift by those who desire it.

The wisdom, which the philosopher seeks, relates especially to the Socratic doctrine that virtue is knowledge. This means that none could realise the best in themselves and thereby become happy unless they knew clearly, as is appropriate for a rational being, what life is worth living for (Cornford, 1999 p175), the true meaning of life. This is provided by the highest object of knowledge, the essential nature or form of the "Good", from which everything that is good and right derives its value for us (Cornford, 1999 p215), and which is the final cause of all that is good in the universe, even of its very existence. From the vantage-point of a knowledge of the Good, the whole of reality, including the moral and physical order is seen as an objective rational system (Cornford, 1999 p212). As the object of a purpose attributed to a divine Reason operating in the world, this supreme Good makes the world intelligible, just as a work of human craftsmanship becomes intelligible when we see the purpose it is designed to serve. Such knowledge, once attained, cannot fail to determine will and action since all desire what is good.

In the essence of the doctrine of forms (whatever of Plato's two worlds mode of expressing it) wisdom is understood to be a view of the world that assumes that there is an overall intelligible order in the universe which has meaning for human life, and has some form of goodness as its basis. Thus, there is to be found a harmony between all aspects of human existence including thought and behaviour, and the underlying first principles of the cosmos. There is, further, a fundamental dignity attributed to the human person that exists beyond all reason and merit.

While ethical discourse tends to focus on the distinction between ethical and unethical behaviour, with a view to avoiding the latter, wisdom is further understood to imply an ability and desire to choose from among ethical behaviours. That is, a mode of behaviour which might best respect the true meaning of human existence and so promote flourishing of the dignity of all human persons. That is, not only to avoid unethical behaviours, but to base decisions upon what is best for all stakeholders.

Application of Wisdom to Knowledge Management

Philosophers, who commit themselves with passion to seek the Good and who are necessarily few in number, are those most appropriate to rule in the ideal state (Cornford, 1999 p231). In the philosopher king of Plato's Republic, there would be a union of political power and love of wisdom. In such a person there will be the supremacy of reason, the divine element in man, over the rest of our nature. (Cornford, 1999 p176) Rather than being free to do whatever he liked, the philosopher king would be like an artist working with constant reference to an unchanging model (the forms such as justice, goodness, and temperance) which irrevocably determines the outline and basic principles of his work (Cornford, 1999 p205). In contemplating a world of unchanging and harmonious order, where reason governs and nothing can do or suffer wrong; he will not fail to fashion himself in its likeness.

For our own times, Plato's rulers might well include those who provide the world with organisational stewardship which have so transformed modern living beyond the powers of national governing bodies. The need for philosopher-kings might now equate with the need for a guiding philosophy for those managing and discoursing on the organisation; they also need to be philosophers in the Platonic sense of being committed to the pursuit of wisdom.

Ethics and Knowledge Management

In its practical aspects, wisdom, assuming an objective moral order, gives direction to human practical and ethical activities, provides an ability to order one's life well, and leads to a good and happy life. In its speculative aspects wisdom strives to grasp first principles, asking the metaphysical "why" questions. It judges and orders less universal disciplines. Science, for example, simply accepts rather than critiques its own first principles (assumptions about an orderly universe and about human knowing). Business philosophies based on economic rational models, outside of legislative restrictions, see the profit motive as predominant with ethical considerations of the individual as secondary thereby providing a dubious guide as to if, why and how knowledge management might be responsibly used. Ethical considerations are necessary to protect and help promote and develop appropriate human wisdom, particularly in an environment that may trivialise the dignity of the human person. Without an ethical perspective,

various humanly devaluing philosophies may be accepted by default. Detectable, for example, in such thinking is the materialist philosophy of scientific enquiry. By default, organisations often assume a mechanistic philosophy leading to a materialism devoid of ethics, which grew out of the origins of modern science. The following section will discuss the origins of mechanistic thought.

Mechanism: What Sems to be the Case

Modern science finds its origins in the 16th and 17th centuries. During this significant period, Bacon (1588-1679) proposes the scientific method, Galileo (1564-1632) explains natural phenomena (using efficient causes and matter in motion), Descartes (1594-1650) employs the method of mathematics (requiring clear and simple ideas as axioms), and Newton (1632-1704) provides a comprehensive system of mechanics based on mathematical laws governing the behaviour of conceptual models (particles with mass concentrated at a point).

Newton discovered that the movements of natural bodies approximated those predicted by these mathematical laws and mechanistic models, which were therefore intelligible, discoverable and useful for prediction. In the modelling process complex natural bodies, are considered - in a process of reduction - from a single viewpoint: the quantitative or mathematical. The natural physical body (what is the case), which cannot be fully comprehended in its multidimensional richness, is reduced to the relatively familiar and comprehensible point-object particle in motion (what seems to be the case). The driving force of mechanism with its accompanying use of efficient causality eventually led to the spectacular success enjoyed by the Industrial Revolution.

Mechanism as Materialism

Mechanism becomes a metaphysics when the assumption is made that all phenomena, including natural bodies, are adequately explained by intrinsically immutable (i.e. subject to no intrinsic change) quantity and local motion, the basic characteristics of machines. This thinking finds its origins in the 'one and the many' debate between Parmenides and Heraclitus² in ancient Greece (Cavendish, 1985), seemingly resolved by Democritus who posited the existence of tiny indestructible material units (the one or being) called atoms and a void (non-being) allowing for plurality and motion (Torretti, 1999, p15). The atoms are therefore able to combine in various ways to form the changing macroscopic bodies of sense observation (the many). All phenomena, including natural bodies were then to be explained in terms of quantity and local motion. Whilst being derived from, although not fully defining, physical objects these models can be considered separately from the objects, although they can not require a separate existence simply by virtue of being intelligible.

Hobbes (1588-1679), whose long life spanned the modern origins of science, is considered the founder of modern metaphysical materialism (Flew, 1985). He equated the quantitative models with the whole of reality, ignoring the reductive process involved in their origin, and so created a metaphysics of mechanism. To identify models (eg. Newtonian particles) with natural bodies, or to regard them as equivalent, is to commit a category mistake of a type identified by Wittgenstein. Although they can appear in sentences of the same logical form, natural bodies and mathematical models do not enjoy the same form of existence.

Upon such a metaphysics, Hobbes developed an epistemology as well as natural, moral and civil philosophies which have continued to influence thinking to this day. Mechanism has become the common-sense method of understanding all physical phenomena. Furthermore, human systems such as politics and economics may also be thought to operate as machines with individuals mere cogs unable to determine their future.

Descartes (1596-1650), in his foundational search for the same absolute clarity and definiteness from the physical world as is found in mathematics, gained an apparently certain basis for knowledge from the existence of his mind which thinks (Watling, 1985). Distinguishing his mind or thinking self from his body, he placed the essence of bodies in their extension (composed of integral parts) with local motion as the only motion considered. This mind-body problem became a mind-matter problem when, as explained above, the abstract models were assumed to be existing physical entities, a process suited to the rationalist thinking of Descartes as it provided the desirable clear and simple ideas upon which a system of knowledge may be built. It was then an easy step for Hobbes to deny mind as a separate substance, and to make mind and matter equivalent. Mind then is considered to be fully explicable in terms of the mathematical models become physical particles, and motion.

²Each of whom performed reductions from the world of permanence and change in natural bodies (Heraclitus finding only measurable change, and Parmenides only the permanence of being) then equated all of reality with their partial viewpoints.

Mechanism and Knowledge Management

Such a conception of the human mind finds sympathy in contemporary attempts to manage intangible human capital, more particularly to isolate the experiences of the individual. The practice of measuring contributions to the corporate knowledge base and valuing these above all else in performance appraisals and promotion (McDermott & O'Dell 2001), raises concerns over measuring something as intangible as knowledge in any objective manner. Not only is it problematic from an accounting perspective (Wilkins, Van Wegen and de Hoog 1997) or dubious in terms of separating the individual and the experience (Malhotra 2001)³ it raises ethical concerns with making individuals participate (Garrick and Clegg 2000). With an emphasis on action rather than reflection, it appears that organisations in their quest to harness knowledge are treating knowledge as a static variable in a cause-effect relationship. While the objectives of Knowledge Management vary, as do the descriptions of what Knowledge Management is, the underlying desire for some it appears, is to be able to emulate the success of individuals long after they cease to participate in the life of the organisation (see Malhotra 2001 for quote by Applegate, Cash and Mills). That is, for the organisation to not be reliant on the talents of individuals. At present such an objective is not possible and the links between decision, decision-maker, decision-taker and organisational context would be central to most knowledge management activities (i.e. where historical records of organisational action are valued).

Ethical Implications of Mechanism

If human persons are fully explicable in mechanistic terms, then their knowledge and personal experiences might justifiably be treated as objects to be captured, shared and used. Just as items of computer technology may be readily replaced, without ethical concern, in the financial interests of shareholders, so workers may be assumed to be of less value when what they know has been captured. Even a cursory acquaintance with current practices such as downsizing, right sizing, mergers, and acquisitions, verify the notion that staff are not truly valued outside of their obvious capacity to produce profit in the short term.

Human Cognition

The central thesis of the paper is that there is an essential non-material aspect to human rationality and human knowledge. Natural bodies (things) are assumed to exist. The human person may find intelligible the essential nature of the thing by a process of abstracting (non-exhaustively, of course) from appearances (cf. Kretzmann & Stump, 1993, p142). The essential nature contains those features involved in a definition (eventually in terms of self-evident truths rather than involving an infinite regress) which cannot be changed without giving rise to a different kind of thing. The result of this abstraction is the concept or idea, which is separate from, but finds expression in words or speech. The possession of ideas is proposed as a pre-requisite for intelligence, and is what is meant by "knowing". Reasoning is then the process of drawing conclusions from propositions whose meaning is understood, because the idea corresponding to each word is possessed. In this process, a sequence of propositions are related according to the laws of logic, by means of cause and effect, or means-to-ends relationships.

While such a process may be replicated in computer based IS, humans at present are much more proficient at interpreting what is said. Harnessing of tacit knowledge in much of the knowledge management literature therefore centres on creating opportunities for people within the organisation to discuss and share experiences. Regardless of the payback from such an activity, the importance of the firm recognising the value of personal growth, participation and learning cannot be under-estimated. In this regard the directions suggested for knowledge management practice should result in a more humane work environment where the firm sees itself as a social system rather than a factory.

Human Consciousness as Subjective Experience

The elusive concept of human consciousness has been described as the subjective character of experience (Nagel, 1974). For any organism, this is what it is for the organism to be that organism, the mental state or inner life of the organism. In the position taken in the paper, human consciousness would include the sum total of all knowing in terms of ideas possessed (however inadequate and awaiting further development) particularly in the context of the experience of knowing that one knows leading to awareness. One is also conscious (has knowledge) of other aspects of the inner life such as feelings and emotions.

³The article discusses isolating the emotion from the knowledge.

To develop any model of consciousness (to elucidate understanding or build an objective theory), there must be a reduction from multiple viewpoints to a single viewpoint; some aspects must be left aside. However, there is only a single point of view in consciousness, the subjective character of the experience (what it is like for a bat to be, rather than to behave as, a bat, to use Nagel's analogy), and so any sort of reduction is not possible. The phenomenological features of experience or consciousness cannot be excluded in a reduction (as is usually the case in deriving models) because that is all there is to experience. An analysis in terms of functional and intentional states is not possible, because robots have these but since they do not know as we have defined knowing they do not experience states or events.

Ultimately, it is not possible to produce a physical theory of the mind (to be distinguished from physical processes in the brain). "If the facts of experience, facts about what it is like for the experiencing organism are accessible from only one point of view, then it is a mystery how the true character of experience could be revealed in the physical operation of the organism" (Nagel, 1974, p385). It follows then that it could not be possible to produce or even emulate intelligent human consciousness.

Our expectations then of passing on experiences must be tempered with an understanding of the limitations of sharing the experience and what can be taken from it. As Bergson (1970) noted, the human mind is not capable of understanding all that is seen and is therefore selective as to what is perceived, thereby giving us limited capacity to fully understand cause-effect relationships. What is shared are the indisputable properties of physical objects: perhaps colour, dimensions, sometimes labels, motion, etc.. Our experiences of the same object however are unique. Our ability therefore to internalise the experiences of another must be further diminished by limitations for developing shared understanding. The arguments raised for knowledge communities seem to confirm that it is not the subjective experience that is passed on, but merely a set of stories that become embedded in organisational norms, values, and practices that provide a means of organisational sense making for the individual or group (Shariq 1998).

Holistic Conception of the Human Person

We propose a holistic and so non-reductionist (claiming to be what is the case) description of the human person as a basis for human ethics, from which flows essential human dignity as a basis for an objective human ethics. This description includes such exclusively human features we perceive in ourselves, all arguably arising from the uniquely human possibility of knowing, and knowing that we know, leading to consciousness, as the following:

- Rationality and desire for understanding and meaning, despite the acknowledged limitations imposed by unconscious psychological drives (cf. the work of Freud, Jung);
- Command of language enabling communication and exchange of ideas (thoughts), feelings, confidences, joys and happiness;
- Reflective consciousness or self-awareness; not only knowing, but knowing that we know;
- Subjectivity – a subject (thinker) as distinct from an object (which is thought about) or a thing;
- Incommunicable individuality;
- Creativity as found in the poet, writer, artist, often seemingly driven to create by a power greater than themselves;
- Possessing a centre of freedom whereby a person determines to choose (rather than is determined by) one motive among many, and so a particular course of action. Correlative to freedom is awareness of responsibility, the need to account for one's actions;
- Awareness of good to be done and evil to be avoided (cf the work of Kant drawing attention to the moral law within);
- Non-rational experiences such as emotions, desires, feelings, intuitions, dreams and images, premonitions, experience of synchronicity or meaningful coincidences which seem to be due to more than chance, including chance escapes from disaster, a mystical sense of awe at the complexity and beauty of all that is observed in the natural world, a sense of the sacred even in the ordinary, a sense of a spiritual character or soul;
- Bodiliness as a centre for relationships, sensuality and sexuality, distinguishing male and female, possessing privacy and dignity;
- Mortality as being subject to the certainty of death, but the subsequent anxiety being transcended by a desire for a higher life.

These aspects of the human person which, like the consciousness described above, defy mechanical or mathematical descriptions have traditionally been embodied in the concept of the soul.

Ethical Implications

These characteristics of the human person are the source of a special dignity. Like consciousness, described above, they cannot be reduced to an objective nature, using mathematical or other models. They cannot be reproduced using electronics to activate

models embodied in computer programs. All this is arguably trivialised by mechanistic conceptions of the human person. The ethical critique should, therefore, identify the limitations of a materialist philosophy which, whatever its value, is adopted or imposed by organisations.

However, perhaps the most important source of human dignity, moral worth and title to respect arises from the responses we make to other persons and the way we matter to one another without which we would not have “a sense of the sacredness of individuals or of their inalienable rights or dignity... a sense that human beings are precious beyond reason or merit” (Gaita, 1999, p5,8). We come to know, firstly and in a special way in those we love, an inestimable dignity beyond reason (when there may seem no source of dignity as in those with severe mental or other disabilities) or merit (where our love or trust has been seriously betrayed) possessing inalienable rights, being ends in themselves, and experiencing internal lives as rich in feelings, memories, thoughts and emotions as we find in ourselves. Respecting such dignity forms the objective basis for ethical treatment of others.

Conclusion

Without, of course, questioning the value of knowledge management for organisations, the paper has drawn attention to aspects of separating the known from the knowing being. A philosophy of mechanism which makes the category mistake of giving the mathematical models of scientific mechanism the same sort of existence as natural bodies has been discussed. All reality, including human minds, are assumed to be explicable by material point objects exerting efficient causality of push-pull by virtue of their characteristic motion. If this is the basis of human rationality, the defining characteristic of the human person, then there is only human behaviour fully explicable in observable causes. This leaves no basis for “oughtness” in human behaviour; there is only that which pleases and that which displeases. There is no objective basis for an ethic of human behaviour, only a constantly adapting and evolving organism.

Ethics provides a basis for a holistic understanding of the person and their place in society and the organisation. Ethics provides a balance to the reductionist models and the inestimable dignity of the human person is established and protected. The holistic basis, trivialised by mechanistic conceptions, arises from consciousness and this “like life itself and time and free-will, is one of the great mysteries before which we have to fall silent” (Townsend, 2000).

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