INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In philosophical terms, a key issue of communities of practice (CoPs) can be located within one of the key philosophical debates. The need for CoPs is traceable to the inadequacy in certain contexts of the so-called scientific or problem-solving method, which treats problems as independent of the people engaged on them. Examples of this can be drawn from the management domains of information systems development, project management, planning, and many others. In information systems development, for example, the whole basis of traditional systems analysis and design requires such an approach. In essence, in undertaking problem solving, the world is viewed as though it is made up of hard, tangible objects, which exist independently of human perception and about which knowledge may be accumulated by making the objects themselves the focus of our study. A more human-centered approach would, by contrast, see the world as interpreted through human perceptions: the reason why the problem cannot be solved is precisely because it lacks the objective reality required for problem solving. In taking this perspective, it may or may not be accepted that there exists a real world “out there”, but in any event, the position adopted is that our world can be known only through the perceptions of human participants.

This question of objective reality is one with which philosophers have struggled for at least 2,500 years, and an understanding of it is essential to determining the need for, and purpose of, CoPs. The next section therefore discusses some of the philosophical issues relevant to the subjective-objective debate: a search for what, in these terms, it is possible for us to know and how we might know it.
Kant’s critical problem, as first formulated in the letter to Herz (February 21, 1772) (Gardner, 1999, pp. 28-29), concerns the nature of objective reality. Prior to Kant, all philosophical schema took objective reality as a given and sought to explain how it was that we could have knowledge of this reality. If this were taken as definitive, it is easy to see how we might build (empirical) knowledge in the way suggested by Locke (1632-1704): that we are born with a “tabula rasa”, or blank slate, on which impressions are formed through experience. This explains the pre-Kantian debate of reason vs. experience as the source of our knowledge: the rationalist view was that, by reason alone, we are able to formulate universally valid truths (for example, around such issues as God and immortality); empiricists, by contrast, see experience as the only valid source of knowledge.

Kant’s insight and unique contribution was to bring together rationalism and empiricism in his new critical transcendental philosophy, the basis of which is his Copernican Revolution in philosophy. Loosely stated, this says that objective reality may be taken as existing, but that, as human beings, we have access to this only through our senses: we therefore see this objectivity not as it is but as we subjectively construct it. Unlike Berkeley (1685-1753), Kant does not claim that objects exist only in our subjective constructions, merely that this is the only way in which we can know them: objects necessarily conform to our mode of cognition.

For this to be so, Kant’s philosophy has to contain a priori elements: there has to be an object-enabling structure in our cognition to which objective reality can conform and thereby make objects possible for us. This is what lies at the heart of Kant’s Transcendental Idealism.

- Objectivity is conceivable only from the perspective of a thinking subject.

In summary:

1. Objectivity is conceivable only from the perspective of a thinking subject.
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