

Communities of Practice and Critical Social Theory

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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.

A FOUNDATION IN KANTIAN CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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*.

- While objects may exist (be “empirically real”), for us, they can be accessed only through their appearances (they are “transcendentally ideal”).
- Our cognition does not conform in some way to empirical reality, rather this objectivity should be seen as conforming to our modes of cognition. In this way, we construct our objective world.
- Objects of cognition must conform to our sense experience. So, in this sense, knowledge is sensible, or the result of experience.
- These objects must conform to the object-enabling structures of human cognition. The resultant transcendental knowledge is (at least) one stage removed from objective reality, and is, according to Kant, governed by *a priori* concepts within human understanding.

This brief review of some key philosophical ideas has led neatly back to the subjective-objective debate. Seen from a Kantian perspective, we simply have no access to objective reality. (Interestingly, and again quite uniquely, Kant did not maintain there to be no objective reality; on the contrary, he argued that there must be real objects, or we would be in the ludicrous position of having perceptions of a world, but there being nothing to give rise to those perceptions.)

What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us. We know nothing but our mode of perceiving them—a mode which is peculiar to us....Even if we could bring our intuition to the highest degree of clearness, we should not thereby come any nearer to the constitution of objects in themselves. (Kant, 1787, p. 82)

In summary:

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

2. Central to Kantian philosophy is the question of how it is possible for subject and object to be so joined—what conditions must apply in order that this might be so?
3. In the Transcendental Deduction, Kant argues that subject and object make each other possible: neither one could be represented without the other.
4. All of this rests on their being: (a) a world of objects which is unknowable to us and (b) *a priori* concepts in understanding which enable representation of this world of objects.

A WAY FORWARD THROUGH CRITICAL THEORY

Theoretically, this philosophical position leads to a grounding in those theories relevant to human understanding and interaction, which are to be found in the social and cognitive domains. Given that in CoPs we are seeking a pluralistic, human perspective, those theories which best explain social interaction might be seen as especially relevant. Drawing again on the stream of social inquiry emanating from Kantian philosophy, this leads through the critical social theory of the early 20th century Frankfurt School to contemporary social theorists such as Foucault and Habermas (see, for example, Habermas, 1971, 1987).

Key concerns within Habermasian critical social theory are issues such as social inclusion, participation, and a view of how we ought to undertake intervention in social domains, all of which are fundamental to the functioning of CoPs. Habermas (1971, 1976, 1987) follows Kant in arguing that reliable knowledge is possible only when science assumes its rightful place as one of the accomplishments of reason. While the achievements of scientific study are not disputed, the problem perceived through the route followed by Kant and Habermas is that the methods of science which have grown out of modernity are effectively self-referential: that scientific study sets up rules and then tests itself against its own rules is a procedure which has given considerable advances to modern society, but to regard this as representing all knowledge is mistaken. Habermas refers to the worst excesses of this as scientism: that we must identify knowledge with science.

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