Chapter 5
An Aristotelian View of Knowledge for Knowledge Management

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Category: Theoretical Foundations of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

Defining and understanding knowledge is a rather broad and open-ended pursuit. We can narrow it considerably by stating that we are interested in defining and understanding knowledge as it pertains to knowledge management, rather than tackling the entire realm of epistemology. This article takes the theory of knowledge espoused by Aristotle and views it through the lens of knowledge management.

The writings of Aristotle have proven to be fertile ground for uncovering the foundations of knowledge management. Snowden (2006) points to Aristotle's three types of rhetorical proof as a basis for incorporating narrative in knowledge management. Buchholz (2006) traces the roots of ontological philosophy, forming the basis of current KM ontology efforts, back to Aristotle's work. Butler in his Anti-foundational perspective on KM (2006), following Dunne (1993) argues that Aristotle's *Phrónésis* and *Téchné* need to be at the core of knowledge management efforts – and while they cannot be directly applied to IT applications, must be among the elements upon which knowledge management is based. Müller-Merbach (2005) provides a look at the fundamentals of applying Aristotle to knowledge management theory.

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It is instructive to seek theoretical foundations for our treatment of knowledge in organizational settings and knowledge management systems. By doing so we increase the likelihood that our solutions are complete and have considered all relevant forms of knowledge that we may desire to manage. Rather than start with modern differentiators of knowledge such as *tacit vs. explicit* (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), *descriptive vs. procedural* (Holsapple and Winston 1996), *local vs. global* (Novins and Armstrong 1997), *declarative vs. procedural* (Minsky 1975) we will take a step back to first principles. In fact, in his more recent work, Nonaka et al. (2008) devotes considerable attention to the Aristotelian roots of the knowledge-based firm.

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, presents five virtues of thought which can be mapped to levels of knowledge:

Epistémé – factual or scientific knowledge

Téchné – skills based technical and action-oriented knowledge

Phrónésis – experiential self-knowledge or practical wisdom based on experience

Noûs – intuition

Sophía – theoretical knowledge of universal truths or first principles

Other learned traditions and cultures give us similar and related elements, such in the Talmudic philosophical tradition (See Maimonides 1966; Luzzatto 1988), and Eastern religion and philosophy (See Gier 2004).

As a starting point we are concerned with:

a) **Knowledge that can be *acquired* in an organizational setting**
   a. Creation
   b. Discovery
   c. Gathering
   d. Validation
b) **Knowledge that can be *organized*, categorized and stored**
   a. Modeling
   b. Classification
   c. Calibration
   d. Integration
c) **Knowledge that can be *distributed* to some point of action**
   a. Sharing
   b. Reuse
   c. Maintenance
   d. Dissemination

These processes form the basis of one of the many models used to understand the stages of knowledge management, that of Schwartz, Divitini, and Brasethvik (2000) identifying the three major KM process groups of Acquisition, Organization, and Distribution (AOD). The AOD model will be used as a foil through which we can explore and apply the Aristotelian view of knowledge to knowledge management.

Without the abilities to acquire, represent, store, retrieve and apply knowledge in a way that positively effects the operation of our organizations, we are not engaging in knowledge management. Conversely, any form of knowledge to which the aforementioned cannot be applied, while of theoretical importance and interest, cannot be managed. True, as argued by Butler (2003, 2006), the knowledge foundations defined by Aristotle might not be transparently converted into IT-based systems, but that should not prevent us from designing our KM systems and processes to support those knowledge foundations to the greatest extent possible.

Consider the view presented in Figure 1 and discussed in the Preface of this volume. The foundational layer of philosophies must inform our choice of practical knowledge management processes. These processes must be implemented through a variety of technologies and focused on end-user applications. Throughout our efforts to we remain focused, to various extents, on managerial, organizational, and social aspects of Knowledge Management.

But how do we get from the Theoretical foundations to KM Processes? In this article we will

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