Chapter 26
Epistemology and Knowledge Management

Jeremy Aarons
Monash University, Australia

Category: Theoretical Foundations of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

This article surveys and explores the relationship between epistemology and knowledge management (KM). Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and extent of human knowledge (Klein, 1998b). Knowledge management is clearly deeply indebted to many ideas derived from epistemology. Much of the seminal work in KM discusses epistemology in a fair amount of detail, and explicitly appeals to insights from epistemology in developing a theoretical account of KM. In particular, the groundbreaking works by Sveiby (1994, 1997, 2001), Nonaka (1994), and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) make explicit appeal to the philosophical insights in epistemology, which has provided the groundwork for much of their pioneering work in knowledge management. One would thus expect there to be a fairly intimate connection between epistemology and knowledge management. The relationship between these two fields, however, is far from straightforward.

This article argues that traditional philosophical discussions about epistemology are generally quite limited in their application to KM. This is because they focus mainly on the production of individual or personal knowledge, rather than sharing and use of knowledge in a collaborative context. Thus many of the insights from traditional epistemology are largely irrelevant for the enterprise of KM.

There are, however, recent developments in epistemology which seem more promising for KM. This article ends with a brief overview of some of these developments, looking at recent work in both the philosophy of science and social epistemology. These approaches seem extremely promising for developing a sounder philosophical and methodological basis for KM.

BACKGROUND: KNOWLEDGE IN EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology—the theory of knowledge—is one of the core branches of philosophy. It is con-

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cerned with exploring the nature, sources, and limits of human knowledge (Klein, 1998a). With a history tracing back to Plato and Aristotle, the field of epistemology has attempted to provide an analysis of *what* the concept of knowledge is—a definition of knowledge. Epistemology also attempts to specify what *legitimates* knowledge, so that we can distinguish genuine knowledge from false or spurious knowledge. To a lesser degree epistemologists have also inquired into *how* we acquire knowledge, and whether there are limitations on the scope of our knowledge (Pappas, 1998). Some have even adopted a position of extreme *scepticism*, claiming that genuine human knowledge is impossible (Cohen, 1998).

The focus of contemporary debates in epistemology essentially traces back to the work of Descartes and his method of doubt. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy,* Descartes (1640) undertakes an inquiry into the nature of knowledge. Here Descartes attempts to find the foundational principles upon which our knowledge rests, by trying to identify some sort of fact that we can be entirely certain of. Thus he advocates that we need "to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations" (Descartes, 1996, p. 12). For Descartes the real challenge here is scepticism—if there is any possibility of doubt about so-called knowledge being true, then it cannot be genuine knowledge. Descartes' inquiry tries to ascertain just what facts about the external world are beyond scepticism, in order to discover the basis of all our knowledge. Following this methodology Descartes famously arrives at the proposition "cogito ergo sum"—I think, therefore I exist—which he claims puts the proposition "I exist" beyond doubt. Contemporary epistemology has followed strongly in this Cartesian tradition, focusing of the question of the justification of knowledge in the face of scepticism. Because of this, questions about the actual generation of knowledge, and of the uses and contexts of knowledge, have been of peripheral concern for the majority of theorists in epistemology.

In this respect, epistemology has typically defined knowledge as an essentially *personal* item that concerns true facts about the world: knowledge is an individual's *true, justified belief*.[1] Additionally, the majority of research in epistemology has generally been concerned solely with *propositional* knowledge: factual knowledge that can be expressed in a sentence, and can be evaluated for truth or falsehood. Thus traditional approaches to epistemology are concerned primarily with *what* knowledge is and how it can be identified, rather than *how* knowledge is created or used.

KM AND EPISTEMOLOGY

The traditional approach to defining knowledge in epistemology contrasts markedly with the definitions typically proposed in the KM literature. For example, Rumizen defines knowledge as "Information in context to produce actionable understanding" (Rumizen, 2002, pp. 6, 288). Similarly, Davenport and Prusak define knowledge thus:

Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in the documents or repositories but also in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms. (1998, p. 5)

These definitions do not view knowledge as essentially personal, true, justified belief, but instead have a notion of knowledge as a practical tool for framing experiences, sharing insights, and assisting with practical tasks. For KM, knowledge is something other than just an individual's understanding of the true facts of the world—it is a *pragmatic* tool for manipulating and controlling the world. It is in this sense that Iivari proposes that knowledge is communal, activity-specific,