

Philosophy of Knowledge As Applied to Learning and Leadership

Eric A. Landis
Cumberland University

Judy Landis

In this paper the nature of knowledge, the purpose of knowledge in regards to leadership, the means of acquisition of knowledge, and the application of knowledge will be discussed. It is evident that the discipline of philosophy is ever changing. There is always room for growth and change as the quest for knowledge is explored. It appears that there are no specific right-or-wrong answers when it comes to philosophy; rather, the importance of the study of philosophy seems to lie in the philosophies themselves. Studying the many different approaches to philosophy can be very beneficial to 21st century scholars who understand and apply the ideas of the various philosophers to learning situations they face in their daily endeavors. It is helpful to review the many divisions of philosophy from the traditional through the modern period, since philosophy is a living model that is never outdated or obsolete.

NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

When trying to form a personal philosophy of knowledge it is important to develop what constitutes “knowledge”. There are many different approaches to knowledge. There are two differing yet complementary approaches to “knowledge” in Western philosophy:

- (1) “rationalism,” which basically postulates that knowledge is obtained through deductive reasoning and
- (2) “empiricism,” which is defined as sensory knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Rationalism

Plato, a rationalist, believed that knowledge resides in the soul. He believed that knowledge comes from within, that knowledge is not taught. Plato believed that knowledge resides in our inner-self rather than in our senses. Plato claimed that philosophy begins in man’s ability to wonder (Moser & Vander Nat, 1995). Plato’s philosophy is metaphysical and worldly philosophy. Plato spoke of core rationalism known as *Platonic rationalism*.

Rene’ Descartes, another rationalist, believed that all knowledge stems from the “truth”. Descartes used a method called “radical doubt” in which he began to doubt everything that could possibly be doubted. He questioned everything severely until he believed he had uncovered the undisputed truth. This, he said, was the foundation for knowledge (Moser & Vander Nat, 1995). Descartes' contributions to the body of philosophical knowledge bring up another question which has been discussed throughout the years: “What is truth?”

For years philosophers have battled over whether truth actually exists. Those philosophers who believe truth exists believe that it is spiritual rather than physical. Those who reject truth find that the notion is an empty one. "Still the problem of truth exists and the position people take toward this question does have an importance on how they conduct their thinking and acting" (Ruggiero, 2001 p.23). Parents and others discuss from an early age what they perceive truth to be; however, as individuals grow older they formulate their own opinions about the way they view truth. Scholars realize that their perceptions of the world are imperfect. "How many times do people watch a football game on television and scream "Bad call" only to find moments later that they were wrong" (Ruggiero, 2001 p.25). Imperfect memory also distorts the view of the truth. Some people are easily influenced, so they can be tricked into creating a false truth. Others also create a truth on deficient information, and many times people build an inaccurate truth based on hearsay. People hear half-truths only to present them as facts and find out later that the information they are claiming to be true is actually incorrect (Ruggiero, 2001).

Some individuals claim that due to their parents' influence in early childhood, imperfect memories, and use of deficient information they are able to create some type of understanding, but it is not truth. The most reasonable definition of truth is "what is so about the facts in their exact arrangement and proportions" (Ruggiero, 2001 p.28). Since truth is so hard to discover it makes it hard to apply it to the discovery of "knowledge". Rationalism has had great bearing on modern concepts of truth in today's society.

Empiricism

The offsetting Western philosophy to "rationalism" is "empiricism". Aristotle was an empiricist who believed that knowledge is not completely an innate quality, but is also sensory in nature. Aristotle believed that people are part of one world and they are living right in the middle of it. The main dispute Aristotle had with Plato's philosophy was Plato believed that people are part of two separate worlds: the world of forms and the world of things. Aristotle questioned that if forms are the center of existence they cannot exist separately. If they are the cause of things, how can they exist in a different world? (Moser & Vander Nat, 1995).

David Hume was also a noted empiricist. Hume dealt with relations of ideas and matters of fact. This philosopher presented the principle of cause and effect. He believed sensory knowledge has a direct relation to experience (Moser & Vander Nat, 1995).

Emmanuel Kant was a "Constructivist". Kant felt that a person could hold moral and religious values that could not be justified on intellectual ground (Moser & Vander Nat, 1995). Kant believed that experiences are the basis of knowledge, but not the only source from which knowledge can be drawn (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Some instructors overlook the wide disparities in their students' life experiences, therefore failing to adjust their curriculum and presentation styles to achieve learning success for everyone.

Skepticism

Sextus Empiricus' approach to knowledge is known as "Skepticism". "Skepticism" involves the challenging of "Dogmatism". Dogmatists believe that their opinions are the absolute truth. "Sometimes groups will make bad decisions because of dogmatically held beliefs" (Lazara, 2002, p. 5). Dogmatic individuals are usually outspoken and use their forceful personalities to influence other members of a group. The skeptic advocates an opposite challenge to a belief that is being dogmatically presented during a learning situation. The idea of skepticism is to present a positive challenge during a discussion by presenting a probing question, contradictory statement, or alternative suggestion related in the form of a positive, not negative, incompatible claim. The term "group think" deals with the pressures that result from working in groups. (Lazara, 2002). Empiricus also presents the idea of a "challenger". The challenger's role in a group is to play the role of devil's advocate. The challenger's role is to continually raise doubts about the group's consensus views. The challenger is not solely interested in changing the views, but is mainly interested in making sure the goals of the group are justified (Lazara, 2002).

Pragmatism

The twentieth century presented the first truly American contribution to the history of philosophy by introducing “Pragmatism”. Charles Peirce defined “Pragmatism” as “a method whose primary goal was the clarification of thought.” Peirce believed that beliefs produced habits, and the way to distinguish between beliefs was to compare the habits they produced (Palmer, 1994, p.276). Pragmatism is a form of radical “empiricism”. William James, another pragmatist, set about using pragmatism to resolve metaphysical and religious dilemmas. James felt that things had an effect on all other things. He felt that nothing could exist without affecting everything else around it. Regarding “truth” James stated, “Ideas which themselves are but parts of our experience become true just insofar as they help us get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experiences... Truth in our ideas means their power to work” (Palmer, 1994, p.280).

PURPOSE OF KNOWLEDGE IN REGARDS TO LEADERSHIP

The purpose of knowledge resides in the useful application of knowledge. Scholars need to understand what knowledge is, to help them come closer to the “truth”. There is a direct link between truth and leadership. Leadership is the ability to guide the efforts of groups of workers to achieve goals and objectives as outlined by their institution. Leaders in business environments motivate their employees to view setbacks with an optimistic explanatory style. That is, setbacks are situation-related rather than reflections of personal failures, and are temporary rather than permanent (Losoncy, 1995). Three ancient methods of discovering “knowledge” are “The Socratic Method”, Aristotle’s “Method of Explanation”, and Sextus Empiricus’ “Method of Opposition”. “The Socratic Method” is a way of seeking the truth. This approach is a form of discourse wherein questions are posed to elicit answers which in turn are challenged by asking further questions” (Lazara, 2002 p.1). By continually asking questions, three things happen: (1) By having answers proven wrong, people come to an understanding that they don’t know what they thought they did; (2) When people are aware of their ignorance they begin to realize that their answers must withstand intense review; (3) A better path to “truth” is cleared (Lazara, 2002). Aristotle’s “Method of Explanation” looks at the causal explanation of the truth (Lazara, 2002). Sextus Empiricus’ “Method of Opposition” challenges the beliefs of dogmatists who view their opinions as absolutely true” (Lazara, 2002).

Leaders must be able to influence people, and successful leaders must be able to change the attitudes and actions of others. To do so, they must be able to gain full support of group members, guiding them in ideas and decision-making. A good leader should motivate the group toward a certain outcome instead of forcing or manipulating the group. If the group members feel that they have been manipulated in any way, the power of the leader is diminished and decisions are compromised (Pickett, William, 2002). It is important that the group goal is perceived by members as the best possible solution and that the group as a whole supports the final solution. It is very important that a leader does not perceive himself/herself as a leader with a group of subordinates, but rather as a whole cohesive group with a common goal. Leaders who understand the purpose of knowledge can then apply that information to their leadership styles, thus becoming more effective in their leadership roles.

Acquisition of Knowledge

In the book entitled “The Minds Past” Michael Gazzaniga discusses how the mind acquires knowledge. According to Gazzaniga, event reconstruction begins with perception and ends in human reason (Gazzaniga, 1998). Infants are born with circuits that enable them to interpret the world. This is why it is important for children between the ages of three and eight to be subjected to many different types of information in order for these connections to reach the full capacity for growth and learning (Hotz, 1996). Each individual learns differently and will perceive the world in a different manner. Many students of brain development believe that the brain is mostly wired by the time one is born; however, studies at a molecular and cellular level believe the brain rewires itself through experience (Gazzaniga, 1998). According to Gazzaniga the brain does not constantly change to accommodate new experiences.

(Gazzaniga, 1998) it is largely a dynamic computing device that is largely rule driven. Gazzaniga states, "We are a finely honed machine that has amazing capacities for learning and inventiveness. Yet these capacities were not picked up at a local bookstore or developed from everyday experience. The abilities to learn and think come with our brains. The knowledge we acquire with these devices result from interactions with our culture. But the devices come with the brain, just as the brakes come with the car" (Gazzaniga, 1998 p.59). Gottfried Leibniz was a rationalist who made advances in symbolic logic. He also believed that we are not born with any innate abilities. Leibniz rationalized that we have too many thoughts, feelings, and ideas to ever believe that "knowing" is an innate quality.

Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi in their book, "The Knowledge Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation" discuss another type of acquisition of knowledge used in manufacturing, "Explicit" and "Tacit" knowledge. Explicit knowledge, a more Western approach to knowledge, is more numbers driven. Tacit knowledge, the Japanese view, is knowledge that is not easily expressed, such as that of a craftsman. Tacit knowledge can be divided into dimensions. The first consists of the skills and experiences that individuals have developed over their lifetimes. The second is a more cognitive dimension that consists of beliefs and perceptions. Tacit knowledge allows us to examine "our image of reality and our vision for the future (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). There is much to be gained from both "explicit knowledge" and "tacit knowledge." Explicit knowledge is a must in management. Reports give managers information that would otherwise be hard to gain. This type of explicit knowledge is easily measured by work production and product advancements. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, deals with the knowledge of self-awareness, answering the question, "How do we know what we know"? The combination of these two types of knowledge is very important to the acquisition of knowledge.

Application of Knowledge

David Garvin in the book "Harvard Business Review on Knowledge Management" defines a learning organization as "a process that unfolds over time and that is linked with knowledge acquisition and improved performance" (Harvard Business Review, 1998 p. 51). Garvin speaks of five activities of a learning organization. Garvin describes these activities as systematic problem solving, experimentation, learning from past experiences, learning from others, and the transfer of knowledge (Harvard Business Review, 1998). It is imperative that managers share new knowledge that is gained and turn it into actionable knowledge. Nonaka and Takeuchi discuss the blending of "Explicit Knowledge" with "Tacit Knowledge". Explicit knowledge is of no use if tacit knowledge is not understood as well. Nonaka and Takeuchi in the book, "The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation" discuss two dominant management styles, the top-down model and the bottom-up model "both of which fall short of fostering the dynamic interaction necessary to create organization knowledge"(Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995 p.124). The top-down method creates knowledge from an information processing perspective. Certain information is disseminated to the top management by which business plans and orders are created. The bottom-up method is a more individualistic approach to knowledge. In this approach, autonomy is the key operating principle. Individuals, not groups, create knowledge. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) discuss a third type of management method, the middle-up-down method, which appears to make the most sense regarding the philosophy of knowledge. In the middle-up-down method, knowledge is created in middle management. In this process team leaders disseminate knowledge to the upper management and workers on the front lines (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Recent literature portrays middle management as disillusioned and fearful of losing their jobs to technological advancements; however, some researchers show middle managers as enlightened and empowered (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). It is important to understand the way management searches for knowledge, but it is also important to put that knowledge into action. If the knowledge gained is not put into use, then the search for knowledge has been time wasted.

CONCLUSION

From very early times in history, philosophers endeavored to explain their beliefs on the subject of philosophy as it relates to learning. Early researchers held a wide variety of viewpoints and were firm in their opinions. They discussed and wrote about their ideas, and from time to time an entirely new theory was added to the body of knowledge on the subject. As the years passed, differing schools of thought emerged, causing the study of philosophy to morph and grow as an ever changing entity. In modern day society, it seems that there are no definite right-or-wrong answers when it comes to the philosophy of learning. Dedicated leaders and learners realize that they can glean much from internalizing the ideas of philosophers through the ages. By devoting time and patience to absorbing and understanding the body of research, these people develop their own personal philosophies of teaching, learning, and leadership. As they broaden their knowledge and apply what they have learned to their own leadership situations, their students enjoy the learning experience more fully and demonstrate higher levels of success in the classroom. The introduction and application of philosophy into the learning environment creates an exciting win/win situation for everyone, proving that philosophy remains a living entity that continues to be very relevant in the modern world of the 21st century.

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