

The Uncertain Ethics of Organisational Knowing: Meaning and Politics in the Pragmatist Tradition

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Introduction

This paper considers two interlinked issues which have arguably received insufficient attention in studies of organisational knowledge: firstly, the problems of meaning, understanding, and intersubjectivity; and secondly, moral and ethical questions surrounding the knowing-action nexus and its inescapably political character. To a varying extent, these issues have remained under-examined despite what might be characterised as an epistemic break in the organisational knowledge literature whereby an initial systems theoretic orientation, with a strong information and communications technology (ICT) bias, has been progressively submitted to criticism by those attempting to promote a social understanding of organisational knowledge grounded in practice (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 2000; Gherardi, 2000; Orlikowski, 2002; Swan *et al.*, 1999; Weick, 1995). One influential strand of the practice-based critique of knowledge management is based on efforts to counter-balance a dominant 'epistemology of possession', which treats knowledge in objectivised and static terms, with an 'epistemology of practice', which emphasises knowing as a practical, socially situated accomplishment (Cook and Brown, 1999). Much of the philosophical underpinning of such practice-based approaches can be traced to the Pragmatist tradition of Peirce, James, and Dewey, either explicitly or certainly in terms of sympathetic resonances with congruent traditions, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ethnomethodology. This paper explores how far this Pragmatist influence on the current organisational knowledge literature

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is able to provide satisfactory responses to the questions of intersubjective understanding and ethics.

Pragmatism provides a persuasive critique of the excesses of scientism and intellectualism associated with dominant threads of Western thought. Here the radical separation between thought and action, or knowledge and practice, as well as the representationalist view of knowledge or truth, are questioned. In their place we are offered a depiction of knowing as a practical accomplishment. At the base of this is Peirce's Pragmatic maxim, outlined in the following by James (1992, p. 39): "To obtain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object ... we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve - what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare". In other words, knowing can not be divorced from the practical conditions of experience in the world. For Cook and Brown (1999), the pursuit of a Pragmatist philosophy opens up new avenues for the conceptualisation of organisational practice. Furthermore, its insights, particularly relating to custom and tradition, are congruent with their theorisation of processes of understanding within organisations in terms of the negotiation of meanings in the context of continuously evolving genres of interaction (c.f. Orlikowski and Yates, 1994). There is evident overlap here with later writing in hermeneutics which emphasises the importance of shared interpretative resources as the basis for intersubjective understanding.

However, the question arises as to whether the grounds for moral consciousness in Pragmatism are in conflict with its relativism and expediency. Consequently, the latter part of the paper moves to consider this issue, drawing parallels with more recent debates between those, such as critical theorists, who attempt to define some universal moral intuition, and those who believe in the possibility of a post-Kantian ethics, even while acknowledging that it is unlikely to be the last word on any ethical dilemma. The main argument is that, despite major differences between those searching for a universal foundation for ethical conduct and those who believe such a foundation can never be found, there is remarkable agreement across many shades of philosophical opinion in the discursive character of ethical judgement, namely, that it is about collective practices of justification. The characterisation of these practices may differ, but in an intellectual climate where metaphysical certainties have been challenged and it is difficult to hold to a conception of truth as a direct mirror of reality (Rorty, 1990 [1979]), there is nonetheless some consensus that ethical dilemmas need to be continually adjudicated through opening and reopening debates surrounding them, in which

multiple perspectives are acknowledged and addressed. This has positive implications for practice-based theories of knowledge, in that there is nothing in their philosophical underpinnings that necessarily prevents them from developing a balanced ethical commitment. However, by way of conclusion to the paper, it is suggested that this endeavour, despite a promising start, has failed to develop any real momentum.

Epistemologies of Possession and Practice

Contributions to the literature on organisational knowledge continue to come from a wide variety of quarters, making this a genuinely trans-disciplinary area of research. Nevertheless, out of this diversity it is possible to detect different episodes in its conceptual genealogy, where particular ideas rise to prominence whilst others are challenged or fall into disuse. Arguably one of the key co-ordinates of such changes can be described in terms of an epistemic shift from what Cook and Brown (1999) have termed an 'epistemology of possession' to one of practice. They characterise the former as the traditional Western or Cartesian view of knowledge, where the emphasis is almost exclusively on the individual knower as the possessor of formal, explicit knowledge about the world: "the idea that knowledge, particularly anything that might pass as rigorous knowledge, is something that is held in the head of an individual and is acquired, modelled, and expressed most accurately in the most objective and explicit terms possible" (Cook and Brown, 1999, p. 384). In contrast, an epistemology of practice shifts the focus away from *knowledge* as a static, object-like substance - *something* that people do or do not have - towards *knowing* as a dynamic, ongoing, practical accomplishment of individuals and groups under specific social settings and contexts of action.

For Cook and Brown (1999, p. 387, emphasis original), knowing refers "to the epistemological dimension of action itself. By 'knowing' we do not mean something that is *used in* action or something *necessary to* action, but rather something that is a *part of* action". The focus on a practice-based understanding of knowledge can be seen as a reaction to the intellectualist bias of the Cartesian tradition, with its radical separation between mind and body, where the 'proper' use of reason is privileged as the route away from prejudice and mistaken belief. This is what Sayer (1992) has termed the 'intellectualist fallacy'. Against this he argues that "we develop and use concepts not only through and for observing and representing the world but for acting in it, for work and communicative interaction; for

making and doing as well as speaking, writing, listening and reading, for running organizations and working in them, for programming computers, cooking meals, teaching children, sorting mail, and so on” (Sayer, 1992, p. 59). This is not only about finding a place for everyday practical activities. Crucially it is also about recognising that there is an inseparable practical component to all acts of knowing, even those ostensibly dispassionate scientific or philosophical activities which, for some, represent the highest achievement of a human reason unsullied by personal belief. As Nietzsche argued (1973, p. 38): “In the philosopher ... there is nothing whatever impersonal ... In every philosophy there is a point at which the philosopher’s ‘conviction’ appears on the scene”.

In distinguishing between epistemologies of possession and practice, Cook and Brown (1999) are not arguing for the straightforward displacement of the former by the latter. Instead, while seeing them as conceptually distinct, they regard both knowledge *and* knowing as coexistent and complementary, involved in a productive interplay or ‘generative dance’. They conceive of “the interplay of knowledge and knowing as a potentially generative phenomenon. That is, for human groups, the source of *new* knowledge and knowing lies in the use of knowledge as a tool of knowing within situated interaction with the social and physical world” (Cook and Brown, 1999, p. 383, emphasis original). The danger comes in attempting to privilege one or other of these categories, although it is clear that the authors are more worried about what they see as a widespread tendency to prioritise an epistemology of possession, rather than identifying potential culprits who focus too exclusively on a practice-based view of knowledge. This is understandable because, within the organisational knowledge literature, at least until more recently, there has indeed been a dominant trend towards an orthodox treatment of knowledge as static, object-like, individuated, decontextualised, explicit, and codified. This is most evident in those accounts of organisational knowledge which proceed from an information processing metaphor which treats human cognition in individual and mechanistic terms as an input-output system involving a series of rule-based transformations (c.f. Cyert and March, 1963; Newell and Simon, 1972; Thompson, 1967). Winograd and Flores (1986, p. 73) have summarised the key features of information processing approaches in the following terms:

At its simplest, the rationalistic view accepts the existence of an objective reality, made up of things bearing properties and entering into relations. A cognitive being ‘gathers information’ about those things and builds up a ‘mental model’ which will be in some respects correct (a faithful representation of

reality) and in other respects incorrect. Knowledge is a storehouse of representations, which will be called upon for use in reasoning and which can be translated into language. Thinking is a process of manipulating representations.

The image of knowledge as a storehouse of representations is particularly apposite for approaches to organisational knowledge based on an epistemology of possession. If knowledge is seen primarily as a collection of codified representations, then it is only a short step to thinking about organisational knowledge in terms of an accumulated storehouse of such representations. One only has to consider the symbolism attached to such terms as data warehousing, knowledge stores, data mining, knowledge repositories, and the like, to see the preoccupation with knowledge as a passive, object-like substance which can be collected just like any other material. The storehouse metaphor makes regular appearances, exemplified by the claim from O'Dell and Grayson (1998, p. 154) that within organisations there “lies, unknown and untapped, a vast treasure house of knowledge, know-how and best practices” which are just waiting to be ‘leveraged’. The portrayal of knowledge-as-object is even more evident in some of the more popularly promoted recipes, tools, and techniques for managing organisational knowledge. For example, Clark (1998, p. 60) explicitly refers to ‘knowledge objects’ which he defines as “knowledge granules created by specialists throughout an organization ... that are accessible to many others in the organization ... small bytes of stored information ... tagged in databases in such a way that they can be assembled into flexible structures”.

According to Brown and Duguid (2000), the three watchwords of object-like treatments of organisational knowledge are disintermediation, disaggregation, and demassification. That is to say, the desire to decompose knowledge into discrete parcels of information which can be abstracted and disembedded from the original context of their creation and moved around without difficulty. This view of knowledge as a free-floating entity which flows about easily in a kind of frictionless information space unsurprisingly goes hand-in-hand with an optimistic view of the enabling capacity of information technologies. At its most extreme, the issue of knowledge flow is reduced to a technical problem of how to capture and transfer information. That such a view is insufficient is now well-established in the literature on organisational knowledge, in no small part due to contributions from authors drawing inspiration from action-based theories and the concept of situated cognition; in other words, from approaches which fall squarely within an epistemology of practice (e.g. Blackler, 1993;

1995; Brown and Duguid, 1991; 2000; Brown *et al.*, 1989; Fleck, 1996; 1997; Gherardi, 1999; Gherardi *et al.*, 1998; Lave, 1988; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Central to the concept of situated cognition is the idea that the process of knowing is actively embedded in specific social, cultural, and physical settings. As Gherardi *et al.* (1998, p. 275) have argued:

Knowledge is not what resides in a person's head or in books or in data banks. To know is to be capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people and activities. On this definition it follows that learning is always a practical accomplishment. Its goal is to discover what to do; when and how to do it, using specific routines and artifacts; and how to give, finally, a reasonable account of why it was done. Learning, in short, takes place among and through other people.

Similarly, for Lave and Wenger (1991, pp. 15-16):

Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. This means, among other things, that it is mediated by the differences in perspective among the coparticipants ... Learning is, as it were, distributed among coparticipants, not a one-person act.

Social perspectives on knowledge and learning have drawn inspiration from a wide range of theoretical frameworks including: Vygotsky's socio-historical approach to activity theory (Blackler, 1993; Engeström, 1987; Wertsch, 1985; 1991); ethnomethodology (Suchman, 1987); evolutionary epistemology and cybernetics (Bateson, 1972; Varela *et al.*, 1991); neo-Marxist theories of practice (Lave, 1988; Lave and Wenger, 1991); and philosophical situation theory (Barwise and Perry, 1983). However, it is with American Pragmatism, and particularly the work of Dewey, that many of the philosophical roots of situated cognition can be found (e.g. Cook and Brown, 1999; Lave, 1988; Schön, 1983). In the next section, we explore some of the connections between the Pragmatist tradition and situated theories of organisational knowledge.

Organisational Knowing and the Pragmatist Tradition

Cook and Brown (1999, p. 387, emphasis original) explicitly recognise their debt to Deweyan Pragmatism as follows:

In developing an understanding of the knowledge/knowing distinction, we have found it useful to draw on the work of the American philosophical school of Pragmatism ... A basic conviction of the Pragmatist perspective in both theory and practice is that our primary focus should *not* be (solely) on the likes of abstract concepts and principles ... but on concrete action. Pragmatists have been centrally concerned with doing, particularly forms of doing that entail making or producing something (from technologies to ideas). Accordingly, when it comes to questions of what we know and how we know, the Pragmatist perspective takes a primary concern not with 'knowledge', which is seen as abstract and static, but with 'knowing', which is understood as part of concrete, dynamic human action.

Despite crucial differences, there are important points of contact between Dewey and other writers in the Pragmatist tradition, such as Peirce and James, whose work he drew upon and attempted to extend. In particular, he shared Peirce's notion of inquiry as exploration in response to a 'felt difficulty' (Peirce, 1878). "Inquiry arises from doubt, which is a type of irritation, a frustration in what one believes or expects, inquiry being an attempt to remove the source of frustration and achieve a state of settled belief ... But inquiry presupposes that one already has some belief or expectation; otherwise there would have been no frustration, no impetus to inquiry" (Mounce, 1997, p 15). The notion of felt difficulty also appears in James (2000a [1907], p. 31), who writes of a kind of 'inward trouble' or disruption of settled beliefs on encountering "a new experience that puts them to a strain".

Borrowing James's example of a child reaching out towards a candle flame, Dewey (1896) illustrates the key features of the Pragmatist notion of inquiry. In doing so, he criticises mechanistic stimulus-response explanations for their incompleteness, and attempts to demonstrate the importance of situating inquiry relative to pre-existing beliefs, from which, he argues, any stimulus derives its significance. A straightforward stimulus-response model would see the child's hand reaching out towards the flame and recoiling on contact; the explanation being that the light of the flame stimulates the child to reach out towards it, whereupon the sensation of burning stimulates withdrawal of the hand. For Dewey, this account is incomplete because it takes the whole incident out of the stream of lived experience in which the child is already participating. The light of the candle flame disrupts the prior experience of the child, promoting a felt difficulty which she attempts to resolve through exploration, in turn resulting in a change to her experience on being burned. Thus, the incident has an important temporal dimension to it. On first encountering a flame, the child reaches out towards it because it is perceived as a disruption of her prior experience. However, on subsequent encounters, contrary to what a mechanistic stimulus-response model

would have us believe, the stimulus does not elicit the same response. Instead, the child is now wary of the flame; rather than a stimulus for exploration, the flame has come to represent a source of danger. Then, over time, as the immediacy of this experience recedes, the flame may cease to be of much interest at all as it is integrated into the child's expanding stock of settled beliefs.

The example of the child and the candle flame represents a simple instance of inquiry, but it can equally be applied to any physical, social, or intellectual encounter in which the smooth course of established belief is disturbed. Indeed, it was this very element of exploration in response to a felt difficulty which Pragmatist philosophers regarded as missing in the rationalist philosophies against which they directed much of their critique. For James, rationalist philosophers who believe in an absolute theory of truth are too ready to foreclose the discussion on theoretical issues by invoking one-word solutions such as 'Matter', 'Reason', 'the Absolute', 'Energy', and so on, thus declaring the issue resolved. However, "if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest ... It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*. *Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest*" (James, 2000a [1907], p. 28, emphasis original). For Dewey (1910b), this attitude was better captured in what he called the happier title of 'the applied and experimental habit of mind' than in the term Pragmatism. The exploratory attitude of inquiry, the unwillingness to accept once-and-for-all solutions that apply in all times and places, is inextricably bound up with the Pragmatist view of reality, which James and Dewey termed *radical empiricism*, to distinguish it from both extremes of idealism and empiricism (Dewey, 1910c; James, 1912a). James's humanism, or what would now be called social constructivism, sees 'truth' as literally meaningless when taken apart from human concerns. Truths (in the plural) are to a significant degree *made* rather than *given*. This has proved a rich source of confusion because it has been taken to mean that reality is simply what we make of it.

However, Pragmatism's ontology is in no way a straightforward idealism which denies the existence of any reality independent of our perceptions. This misplaced accusation of idealism derives from collapsing truth into reality, a tendency which flows easily from a representationalist or correspondence theory of truth. At its most extreme, truth is taken simply as a faithful reflection of some aspect of reality. Having achieved the status of an

absolute or final truth, it is but a short step to speak of truth and reality as interchangeable. A truth claim then loses its character as a representation and begins to be treated as reality itself (c.f. Berger and Luckmann, 1966). A closer look at James's work indicates that he was at great pains to keep truth and reality conceptually separate. He did not deny the existence of a relatively autonomous reality, over large swathes of which specific individuals have only limited influence. Elements of this reality enter our awareness as a stream of consciousness or flux of sensations which are more or less forced upon us (James, 1950 [1890]). "Over their nature, order and quantity, we have as good as no control. *They* are neither true nor false; they simply *are*" (James, 2000a [1907], p. 107, emphasis original). Truth and falsity can not be abstracted from human concerns because they are only relevant to what we say about reality. James (2000a [1907], p. 108, emphasis original) goes on to write that:

... however fixed these elements of reality may be, we still have a certain freedom in our dealings with them. Take our sensations. *That* they are is undoubtedly beyond our control; but *which* we attend to, note, and make emphatic in our conclusions depends on our own interests; and according as we lay the emphasis here or there, quite different formulations of truth result. We read the same facts differently ... What we say about reality thus depends on the perspective into which we throw it. The *that* of it is its own; but the *what* depends on the *which*; and the *which* depends on *us*.

The Pragmatist conception of truth as provisional and potentially revisable is also closely linked to a conception of reality as continuously emerging, making it problematic to cling to a philosophical method dedicated to a "[p]assionless imperturbability, absolute detachment, complete subjection to a ready-made and finished reality" (Dewey, 1910d, p. 174). James ([1907] 2000a, 113, emphasis original) also makes this point in contrasting Pragmatism and rationalism: "*for rationalism reality is ready-made and complete from all eternity, while for pragmatism it is still in the making, and awaits part of its complexion from the future. On the one side the universe is absolutely secure, on the other it is still pursuing its adventures*". We will have cause to return to the Pragmatist conception of truth later insofar as it has a bearing on ethical concerns. However, for present purposes, its relevance lies in shedding light on the ontological position underlying Pragmatism's epistemology of inquiry, where the notion of reality as "something resisting, yet malleable" (James, 2000a [1907], p. 113) complements the idea of inquiry which "converts the absolutely empty notion of a static relation of 'correspondence' ... between our minds and reality, into that of a rich and active commerce ... between particular thoughts of ours, and the great universe of other experiences in which they play their parts and have their uses" (James, 2000a [1907], p. 35).

Returning to theories of organisational knowledge, Cook and Brown (1999) have adopted a broadly similar position by linking together the Pragmatist notion of inquiry (which they term productive inquiry) with the concept of *affordance* associated with Gibson (1979) and Gaver (1996), and those of *facilities* and *frustrations* introduced by Ortega y Gasset (1961 [1941]). The idea of affordance, in the sense used by Gibson (1979), refers to the character of perception and how particular characteristics of the world yield clues as to what it is and is not possible to do with them. This sense of affordance has been extended by Gaver (1996) in relation to design work, where interactions between people and characteristics of the world manipulated through design *afford* specific qualities of interaction. As Cook and Brown (1999) indicate, this is not dissimilar from the notion of facilities and frustrations proposed by Ortega. The latter was centrally concerned with how “projects of being and of doing” are invented and emerge through ongoing interactions with the social and physical worlds (Ortega, 1961 [1941], p. 202). In these interactions facilities and frustrations are encountered which enable or constrain our relations with these worlds. Crucially, he did not conceptualise these enabling or constraining features as intrinsic properties of the world, but rather as features emerging from our interactions under concrete circumstances. In other words, characteristics of the world are not felt as frustrations or facilities unless they are experienced as such in our pursuit of various projects of being and doing.

There are clear similarities here with Pragmatist thinking (c.f. Donoso, 1998). For Pragmatists, abstract philosophical questions are often not so much wrong as empty or irrelevant because they have little or no bearing on the concrete concerns of real people, constituting instead an escapist “spectator theory of knowledge (Dewey, 1929, p. 23). To illustrate this point, Peirce (1878) criticised the Cartesian project of submitting all beliefs to systematic criticism in an attempt to achieve absolute certainty. In addition to arguing the incoherence of any suggestion that it is possible to revise all one’s beliefs simultaneously, Peirce primarily saw Descartes’s all-encompassing doubt as an unreal position. He contrasted the Cartesian doctrine of doubting everything, regardless of whether one actually experienced doubt about all one’s beliefs, with the Pragmatist approach to inquiry generated by felt difficulties or the real experience of doubt. “Pragmatism, then, as an account of inquiry, elucidates doubt or belief by relating it to the one who inquires. It treats him/[her] as in the midst of the world, viewing not the whole but some aspect of it, in the light of some body of belief, from some point of view or perspective” (Mounce, 1997, p. 16). Ortega’s account of interaction with the world is consistent with this view, since properties of the

social and physical worlds remain as potentialities and do not achieve relevance as supporting or inhibiting conditions until they are actually involved in interaction with people pursuing their specific projects.

Superficially, there appears to be a connection here with the concept of *conditions of satisfaction* as outlined by Searle (1983, 1999), which refers to whether or not an intentional state with propositional content is satisfied by virtue of its relationship with properties of the world. As Searle (1999, p. 100) has argued, we “need a notion more general than the notion of truth because we need a notion that covers not only those intentional states like beliefs that can be true or false, but states like desires and intentions, which can be fulfilled or frustrated, carried out or not carried out”. However, the crucial difference is that Searle, unlike the Pragmatist tradition, believes that it is impossible to reject the correspondence theory of truth and still hold to an external realism which accepts that there is a reality which is independent of our knowledge of it. As Searle (1999, p. 14) has argued, “what we say about such [independently existing] objects is true or false depending on whether it corresponds to how things are in the world. Thus, external realism underlies other fundamental philosophical views that are frequently denied - the referential theory of thought and language, and the correspondence theory of truth”. As we saw earlier, this rests on a category error regarding the status of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. Ironically, Searle’s brand of external realism presents reality as insufficiently independent of our truth claims about it, at least in conceptual terms; it is at once detached at the same time as being tyrannical about what we are permitted to say about it. It is worthwhile reiterating James’s argument that reality simply *is*; “The *that* of it is its own; but the *what* depends on the *which*; and the *which* depends on *us*” (James, 2000a [1907], p. 108, emphasis original).

The correspondence theory of truth too easily leads to the hypostatisation of eternal truths which, taken to its logical conclusion, results in an anti-humanism which eliminates people from any intelligible role in acting in and on the world. James (2000a [1907], p. 112, emphasis original) characterised the mistakenness of such an approach in the following terms:

Reality, we naturally think, stands ready-made and complete, and our intellects supervene with the one simple duty of describing it as it is already. But may not our descriptions ... be themselves important additions to reality? And may not previous reality itself be there, far less for the purpose of reappearing

unaltered in our knowledge, than for the very purpose of stimulating our minds to such additions as shall enhance the universe's total value ... In our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative. We *add* both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands ... Man *engenders* truths upon it.

In attempting to support this position, James referred in many places to the work of F.C.S. Schiller and the latter's view of reality as both resisting yet plastic, which again calls to mind Ortega's facilities and frustrations. The similarities do not end there, as Schiller (1912) also argued that the boundaries of this plasticity are only discovered by interacting with the world, pushing against its limits until we are forced back by its resistance.

It is this perpetual return to the realm of concrete experiences in and of the world, as opposed to a rarefied quest for transcendental ideals or universal truths, which puts the stamp on the Pragmatist attitude. It is this same concern with the connectedness between knowing and action within specific social and physical contexts which drives situated theories of organisational knowledge. It is also this common attitude which goes a long way to explaining why both Pragmatists and contemporary organisational knowledge theorists have tended to focus on 'practical' problems and on "forms of doing that entail making or producing something (from technologies to ideas)" (Cook and Brown, 1999, p. 387). In the case of practice-based theories of organisational knowledge, the problem-solving and learning activities which have been used for illustration include some of the following: how milk delivery workers use the way the crates are configured to make complicated calculations (Scribner, 1984); the apprenticeship of tailors in West Africa (Lave and Wenger, 1991); flute making in Boston (Cook and Yanow, 1993); ship navigation crews (Hutchins, 1995); photocopier repair technicians (Orr, 1996); aircraft carrier crews (Weick and Roberts, 1993); insurance claims processors (Wenger, 1998); Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (Lave and Wenger, 1991); and error checking on airline flight decks (Hutchins and Klausen, 1996). What all of these diverse examples have in common is their focus on knowing as a practical and socially situated accomplishment whereby the ability of people to make sense of the situations they find themselves in is based on a whole series of interpretative resources distributed across people, artifacts, and settings. Accordingly, this "leads us to understand knowledge and practice as reciprocally constitutive, so that it does not make sense to talk about either knowledge or practice without the other" (Orlikowski, 2002, p. 250). The

emphasis is also on the social and collective character of knowing, which raises the crucial question of intersubjective understanding, to which we now turn.

The Problem of Intersubjective Understanding

As we have seen, the Pragmatist concern with the interplay between knowledge and experience driven by inquiry has been taken up, explicitly or otherwise, by practice-based approaches to organisational knowing. These emphasise the centrality of participating in practice, or involvement in ‘authentic activity’ (Brown *et al.*, 1989), for understanding the nature of that practice and in turn being able to participate with adequate proficiency. Moreover, knowing-in-practice is portrayed as a necessarily social accomplishment. As Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 51) have argued, “[k]nowledge of the socially constituted world is socially mediated and open ended. Its meaning to given actors, its furnishings, and the relations of humans with/in it, are produced, reproduced, and changed in the course of activity”. Accompanying this is a transformation in the status of knowledge from “the Sisiphean struggle to answer the question ‘What knowledge is objectively true?’ to a Promethean concern with the question ‘What understanding is intersubjectively valuable?’” (Contu and Willmott, 2000, p. 274). This involves a shift from a concern with meaning, focusing on subject-object relations, to questions of understanding as embedded in sociality: “if the problem of ‘*meaning*’ lies in how the ego grasps the object or the thing, then the problem of ‘*understanding*’ is a question of intersubjectivity” (Lash, 1999, p. 149, emphasis in original).

It is here that attempts to trace the influence of the Pragmatist tradition through to current practice-based approaches to knowledge become more complicated. The writings of Peirce, James, and to a lesser extent Dewey, were arguably not so concerned with the issue of understanding between people, concentrating more on the relationship between the individual and experience. While James (1912b), for example, explored the question of shared cognition in asking ‘how two minds can know one thing’, he characteristically proceeded from the level of individual consciousness and on this basis attempted to forge an analysis of social experience. According to Cronk (1976), this methodological subjectivism means that any adequate treatment of intersubjectivity is effectively limited. Dewey moved beyond this position to consider how knowledge and learning are necessarily embedded in wider social

practices, yet there are still sufficient traces of methodological subjectivism to make his approach to intersubjectivity problematic.

It would be tempting at this point to introduce the figure of George Herbert Mead as the link between the early Pragmatism, with its individualistic bias, and later approaches, such as ethnomethodology, lifeworld phenomenology, and neo-Pragmatism, that acknowledge the centrality of language and communication for understanding sociality, and which all in their own way have influenced contemporary practice-based theorising on organisational knowledge. Although convenient, this is altogether too straightforward a connection. The development of Pragmatism from its early proponents through to its current adherents is a story of discontinuities as well as continuities, parallel and intersecting strands of thinking, agreements and disagreements, which together make up an exceptionally complex picture. While Pragmatism, as a distinctive intellectual movement, largely drifted into obscurity from the 1930s onwards, due in no small part to the aggressive ascendancy of logical positivism, many of its central ideas retained their influence, either through a direct extension of its legacy, or indirectly through largely equivalent developments in other theoretical traditions. On the question of intersubjective understanding, it is to other traditions, most notably hermeneutics, that one needs to turn rather than Pragmatism. Having said that, there are many points of fundamental agreement between variants of the two traditions.

The starting point for hermeneutics is the recognition that there is a fundamental limitation in our ability to know the concerns and experiences of other people because, of necessity, intersubjective understanding is symbolically mediated, with language being the principal, but by no means only, system of symbolic exchanges. As Gadamer (1976, p. 25) has suggested, "there would be no hermeneutical task if there were no mutual understanding that has been disturbed and that those involved in a conversation must search for and find again together". In its early forms, as in the writing of Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was concerned with the interpretation of canonical texts, but it was through Dilthey that the wider relevance of hermeneutics for all aspects of social interaction came to be recognised (Dilthey, 1989 [1883]). However, Dilthey's notion of 'empathic excavation' has been interpreted by critics of hermeneutics as involving some sort of quasi-mystical process of transposing oneself into the mind of others in order to appreciate or *empathise* with their point of view (e.g. Abel, 1948). Consequently, writers in the hermeneutic tradition have been at pains to

outline a more robust foundation for intersubjective understanding than the concept of empathy.

One of the main inspirations for hermeneutics came from the phenomenology of Husserl (1931, 1970a, 1970b), although it attempted to move beyond his search for *epoché* as a way of finding a presuppositionless space from which to construct a secure theory of knowledge. *Epoché*, or transcendental reduction, refers to the 'bracketing' of ego's flux of experience, an act of withdrawal involving the suspension of engagement in direct experience in order to adopt a reflective attitude, which is seen as the condition of possibility for grasping some ideal or originary meaning. Hermeneutics also marked a departure from the effectively subject-object orientation within Husserl of an individual standing in relation to an external reality which enters consciousness via a stream of lived experience, closely echoing the same problem evident in the work of James. According to Lash (1999, p. 149), phenomenology "is much less equipped to deal with the relation of the ego to other human beings. Husserl had no satisfactory way of moving from the transcendental reduction of objects by the ego to the understanding of the 'alter ego' or 'other'".

For hermeneutics, transcendental reduction on the part of an external observer is incapable of getting behind the pre-interpreted character of the social world. As Heidegger (1962 [1927], pp. 191-192) argued, "[w]henver something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, foresight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us". Ego encounters a world which can never be conceptually pristine because one finds a world which is already symbolically structured by those 'others' acting within it. Similarly, for Schutz (1962, pp. 5-6), the social world "has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, thinking, and acting therein. They have preselected and preinterpreted this world by a series of common-sense constructs of the reality of daily life, and it is these thought objects which determine their behavior, define the goals of their action, the means available for attaining them".

The crucial features of social conduct emphasised within the hermeneutic tradition are intersubjectivity as a condition of understanding, as well as the role of pre-existing shared interpretative resources which make such understanding possible and shape the processes of meaning generation. The significance of intersubjectivity for hermeneutics can be found in

its recognition that the self only exists as it does in relation to other selves. This is where the work of Mead, although largely running in parallel to phenomenological hermeneutics, exhibits important points of contact. Mead reversed the methodological subjectivism of the earlier Pragmatists by taking groups rather than individuals as the starting point, arguing that social action constitutes a nexus that is more than the summation of individual interactions. The development of the self (individuation) and participation in different social groups (socialisation) are necessarily intertwined, based on symbolically mediated interactions that presuppose common ground and which, at their most developed, involve an orientation to the group as a 'generalised other'.

A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct. He takes its language as a medium by which he gets his personality, and then through a process of taking the different roles that all the others furnish he comes to get the attitude of the members of the community ... There are certain common responses which each individual has toward certain common things, and in so far as those common responses are awakened in the individual when he is affecting other persons he arouses his own self. The structure, then, on which the self is built is this response which is common to all, for one has to be a member of a community to be a self.

(Mead, 1934, p. 162)

There is clear overlap here with the hermeneutic tradition and its suggestion that to participate with adequate competence in intersubjectively conditioned acts of reaching understanding, one must have access to shared interpretative resources, including relevant aspects of what Schutz and Luckman (1973) called the *social stock of knowledge*. This taken-for-granted knowledge is socially distributed and forms the background assumptions, typificatory schemes, and symbolic resources which individuals in interaction draw upon. "I live in the common-sense world of everyday life equipped with specific bodies of knowledge. What is more, I know that others share at least part of this knowledge, and they know that I know this. My interaction with others in everyday life is, therefore, constantly affected by our common participation in the available social stock of knowledge" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 56). A key characteristic of the social stock of knowledge is its differentiation according to zones of familiarity and relevance, with more detailed and complex knowledge about those areas which are more familiar and relevant to an individual. Furthermore, all aspects of the social stock of knowledge as a whole are not brought into

focus uniformly at any given time. Instead, drawing on Husserl's concept of *attention*, the concentration on different areas of knowledge shifts according to context, such that as "some zones of reality are illuminated, others are adumbrated" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 59).

It is the recognition of a set of taken-for-granted assumptions which forms the basis in hermeneutics for addressing the problem of intersubjective understanding without recourse to empathic arguments. It is the joint participation in the social stock of knowledge which creates the conditions of possibility for intersubjective understanding. Crucially, understanding may be severely truncated without such participation. It is through the 'merging of horizons', according to Gadamer (1989), or the synthesis of background knowledges, according to Schutz (1972), that the mutual understanding of ego and alter can emerge. As Lash (1999, pp. 150-151) explains, "the more closely contexts of experience match, the more possible it is to achieve simultaneous flow of experience ... The less that the other is part of this 'We', the greater the extent to which I see his or her acts as 'external facts' ... The more, on the other hand, I can enter into a We relationship with you and come to grasp your project, your 'in-order-to' motives, the more genuine understanding, i.e. *verstehen*, is at issue".

Here again the significance of context comes to the fore. Consistent with this is the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1984) This highlights the context-dependency of language, whose normal operation depends on the presumption of a shared understanding of context permitting the suspension of the disruptive requirement to make explicit the background assumptions lying behind any utterance, which in theory could result in an infinite regress of explication. Of course, any presumption of mutual contextual understanding or shared access to the same provinces of the social stock of knowledge may prove to be unfounded. A mismatch of assumptions or ignorance of conventions may thus be a fertile source of misunderstanding. This is similar to the later Wittgenstein's arguments about a plurality of language games. Crucially, "this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten ... Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 11). It is necessary to participate in a given form of life in order to have an, often tacit, awareness of the rules of the game, without which understanding is invariably limited.

Whether one speaks of the common responses of a community, the social stock of knowledge, or particular forms of life, the implications are much the same: relations of membership and meaning are closely connected. This insight has been fully embraced by practice-based theories of organisational knowledge. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice, for example, is primarily concerned with the dynamic processes through which individuals gradually gain access to a given community by participating in its practices through which identities are transformed and new possibilities are created for understanding the world as experienced. According to Lave and Wenger (1991, pp. 51-52), “[p]articipation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction - indeed, are mutually constitutive ... persons, actions, and the world are implicated in all thought, speech, knowing, and learning”. Knowing is characterised as a provisional and localised accomplishment relative to the communities within which it takes place. Consequently, for Suchman (2000, pp. 312-313), “at issue here is not knowledge as a self-standing body of propositions, but identities and modes of action established through ongoing, specifically situated moments of lived work, located in and accountable to particular historical, discursive and material circumstances”.

The depiction of knowledge as situated, distributed, provisional, and negotiated, which owes more than a small debt to Pragmatist thinking, is one of the major contributions of practice-based approaches to organisational knowledge. It provides an important corrective to the information processing view where “the power of knowledge depends on its degree of abstractness and generality - the more abstract and general, or ‘decontextualized’, knowledge is, the more contexts in which it will allow for ‘intelligent behavior’” (O’Connor, 2001, p. 287). Understanding the necessarily situated character of knowledge offers the potential for a much more sophisticated analysis of socioculturally embedded practices of knowing and learning in organisations. However, it is not without its hazards. In particular, it raises the familiar objection that if knowledge is situated and judged according to localised standards then what happens when the standards of two or more communities or forms of life come into conflict. Are we condemned to an indifferent relativism which remains agnostic in its valuation of alternative local standards, or can we voice our own commitments, even if we recognise that they are themselves situated, provisional, and revisable? Unfortunately, practice-based approaches have tended to be more or less silent on these questions. This is where they diverge most noticeably from the influences of Pragmatism and hermeneutics,

both of which regard the issues of knowledge and understanding as inseparable from moral and ethical concerns. It is to these themes that we now turn.

Pragmatism and the Ethics of Knowing

So far I have argued that practice-based approaches to organisational knowledge have drawn upon philosophical influences, such as Pragmatism and broadly parallel traditions such as hermeneutics and phenomenology, which has enabled them to offer a powerful critique of approaches that treat knowledge as an objective, self-contained commodity that “resides in the heads of persons, and ... is appropriated, transmitted and stored by means of mentalistic processes” (Gherardi, 2000, p. 212). The contribution of Pragmatism has been to connect up knowledge, action, and experience by conceiving knowledge as an active process that is set in motion as a response to ‘felt difficulties’, or disruptions to the normal flow of experience. Mead’s symbolic interactionism, lifeworld phenomenology, and hermeneutics extended this insight by shifting the focus from subject-object relations to the question of intersubjectivity. Accordingly, knowledge is not only inseparable from being-in-the-world, that world is also thoroughly social in character and knowing, including the development of self-knowledge, is only possible in relation to communities of knowers. However, there is an important aspect of these traditions that has not received the amount of attention in the practice-based literature that it deserves. This concerns the political and ethical implications of adopting a view of knowledge as inseparable from practice, socially situated, provisional, and revisable. Pragmatist and hermeneutic approaches have clearly acknowledged these concerns, not least because of the need to respond to criticisms regarding their views on truth and justification, and there is a strong moral dimension to their ideas. This appears to be missing or, at best, uncertain, in much of the practice-based literature. Given the scope and complexity of these issues, the intention here is merely to sketch a few of the alternative contributions in social theory, both supportive and critical, that have attempted to address these themes. The aim is to provide some signposts for considering the politico-ethical implications of practice-based theories and how to address these.

Criticisms of Pragmatism and hermeneutics have come primarily from those who are concerned that their view of knowledge as context-dependent, provisional, and revisable leaves them unable to evaluate alternative validity claims and, therefore, unable to adjudicate over competing ethical positions. The claim is that these traditions consider truth to be

whatever we make of it, and so there can be no secure position from which to judge between good and bad, right and wrong. It is questionable whether this is wholly justified, particularly since there has been a fair amount of misrepresentation and caricature on both sides of the debate. In the case of Pragmatism, there has been much confusion surrounding the so-called 'Pragmatic maxim' that the truth of a notion is only meaningful according to whether or not it makes a practical difference. As presented by James, this results in a depiction of truth as "the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons" (James, 2000 [1907], p. 38), or as "only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving" (James, 1911, p. xi). This has been taken to mean that anything goes, no doubt fuelled by such statements as "[t]ruth is what we say about them [experiences], and when we say that they have come, truth is satisfied" (James, 2000 [1907], p. 32). Moreover, it has been argued that the Pragmatic conception of truth leads to a narrow instrumentalism, an apology for greedy acquisitiveness, that was portrayed as being in tune with the peculiarly American roots of Pragmatism, coming under the sway of burgeoning commercialism (Russell, 1922). Russell was highly critical of this instrumentalism, particularly as he saw it in Dewey's notion of inquiry, which he argued involves the slippery judgement of beliefs by their effects rather than their causes. He had deep misgivings about the ethical implications of this position.

In all this I feel a grave danger, the danger of what might be called cosmic impiety. The concept of "truth" as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways in which philosophy hitherto has inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness - the intoxication of power ... I am persuaded that this intoxication is the greatest danger of our time, and that any philosophy which, however unintentionally, contributes to it is increasing the danger of vast social disaster.

(Russell, 1946, p. 856)

Mead (1938, p. 97) expressed concern that Pragmatism had come to be "regarded as a pseudo-philosophic formulation of that most obnoxious American trait, the worship of success ... a Ford efficiency engineer bent on the mass production of philosophical tin lizzies". While it is not difficult to see how this position developed, it is doubtful that it provides an entirely fair assessment of the Pragmatist notion of truth. Certainly the Pragmatist tradition emphasised the judgment of the truth of beliefs according to their practical consequences, but this does not have to be interpreted in narrowly instrumentalist

terms, nor as implying the denial of any reality outside human control. To speak of the truth as expedient is to argue that it is not about discovering universal or final representations of the world, but rather about connecting us up with our experiences in such a way that we can cope with them. According to James (2000 [1907], p. 30), “ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience”. They are not a straightforward and immutable copy of reality, but are liable to revision, particularly where new experiences disturb our settled beliefs and prompt us to search for a satisfactory solution to ease the disturbance. Truths are about reality, from a particular standpoint, but they are not identical to reality because they happen to ideas and not objects-in-the-world. In James’s terms, reality is not *true*, it simply *is*. This has been taken as evidence of anti-realism, but James (1911, pp. xix-xx) was almost exasperated in his dismissal of this:

Altho’ in various places in this volume I try to refute the slanderous charge that we deny real existence, I will say here again, for the sake of emphasis, that the existence of the object, whenever the idea asserts it ‘truly’, is the only reason, in innumerable cases, why the idea does work successfully, if it work at all; and that it seems an abuse of language, to say the least, to transfer the word ‘truth’ - from the idea to the object’s existence, when the falsehood of ideas that won’t work is explained by that existence as well as the truth of those that will.

Much the same ground has been covered by recent exchanges between neo-Pragmatists, such as Rorty and Putnam, on the one hand, and critical theorists, such as Habermas and Apel, on the other. Rorty (1990 [1979], 1982, 1988), for example, has drawn on both Pragmatism and hermeneutics to argue that, given the need to reject the correspondence theory of truth as a mirror of reality, it is preferable to speak not of truth, but of justification. The former implies finality and closure; it is confrontational in that “the aim is to confront people with conclusions they are bound to accept” (Mounce, 1997, p. 193). The latter, in contrast, is conversational; it takes place relative to the context-dependent standards of different communication communities and the best that can be hoped for is to keep the conversation going and extend it to as wide an audience, present and future, as possible. In this view, justification “can only be something relatively local and ethnocentric - the tradition of a particular community, the consensus of a particular culture ... what counts as rational or as fanatical is relative to the group to which we think it necessary to justify ourselves - to the body of shared belief that determines the reference of the word ‘we’” (Rorty, 1991, p. 176).

This sort of relativism is deeply worrying to critical theorists, who agree in rejecting the correspondence theory of truth, but who also believe that it is possible to discover a universal moral intuition on which to judge between competing validity claims. For Habermas (1984, 1987), the basis for this can be found in a discourse ethics based on the general structure of communicative action where actors are orientated towards one another with the common aim of reaching understanding. This suggests, in principle at least, that it is possible to reach common agreement about ethical questions through rational discourse in which competing validity claims are proposed and justified, and subjected to impartial adjudication through the process of argumentation. The conditions under which this can occur is termed the *ideal speech situation* where participants in communication “have to presuppose in general that the structure of their communication ... excludes all force - except the force of the better argument” (Habermas, 1984, p. 25). Rorty (2000, p. 16) has criticised this position on two main issues. Firstly, it is highly unlikely that the conditions of argumentation necessary for the ideal speech situation ever exist in practice because “domination-free communication ... is impossible as long as there are human communities which remain exclusivist”. Rorty is pessimistic about the possibility of dissolving such exclusivity. He further considers Habermas’s claim for a transcendent moment of universal reason built into communicative action to be an empty boast. To say that a particular validity claim can and will be successfully justified to all audiences, present and future, real and imaginable, is a strong promise and one which Rorty thinks is impossible to demonstrate without actually defending any such claim against objections from all possible audiences. Secondly, Rorty argues that Habermas’s focus on intersubjective *understanding* is incomplete because it is quite possible for two people involved in a dispute to reach a clear understanding of each other’s position and yet still disagree, for perfectly acceptable reasons. The persuasive power of the ‘better argument’ may not be at all obvious, especially where those involved in a dispute hold to different criteria of valuation.

Apel (1999) has attempted to defend discourse ethics against these objections by depicting it as a universalisable procedural or methodological principle rather than a metaphysically transcendental one. As with Habermas, he is searching for a secure philosophical foundation on which to ground ethics in order to address what he regards as the main problem of hermeneutics, namely: “If and when one follows the insights of *hermeneutic* phenomenology concerning the *a priori* of pre-understanding the life world, which is tied up with the *a priori* of belonging always already to a community of speech and cultural tradition, then it is indeed

plausible to assume that with regard to ethics also, i.e. to all valuations of something as good or bad, we are under the sway of a particular cultural tradition” (Apel, 1999, p. 157, emphasis original). The universalisable kernel of discourse ethics, he goes on to argue, can be grounded in procedural norms that cut across different cultural traditions.

The methodological point of discourse ethics is a *procedural* one in so far as the principle of justice and co-responsibility is only a regulative idea for the practical discourses - to be opened again and again - between the representatives of the different cultures and life-forms and the different constitutional states ... [D]eep rooted differences, and possibly conflicts, between different cultural traditions come into play. And we cannot expect always to reach solutions of the problem through discursive consent. But, according to the fundamental procedural norms of discourse ethics, it has to be demanded that, even in cases of persistent dissent, we try at least to reach a discursive consent about the reasons of the dissent and its unresolvability in order to facilitate juridical compromises. For this purpose, in a multicultural society permanent efforts of communicative understanding - also in the *hermeneutic* sense - between the different traditions of ‘strong values’ ... are required.

(Apel, 1999, p. 160, emphasis original)

The main difference between neo-Pragmatism and the discourse ethics of critical theorists lies with their varying willingness, in the absence of a correspondence theory of truth, to give up on the search for universal foundations. While this is, of course, a crucial difference, there are remarkable similarities in how both approaches believe ethical questions can be addressed; similarities which, perhaps surprisingly, are also shared by many postmodernist thinkers. As McCarthy (1999, p. 174) has argued, “[t]hey all take for granted the possibility of reflectively questioning received beliefs and values, of gaining critical distance from established norms and roles, and of challenging ascribed individual and group identities”. The potential for addressing ethical questions occurs through an open-ended and continuous process of justification and debate in which participants reflexively examine their own views as well as taking account of the views of others.

Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to see how far critical theorists take the ideal of a universal discursive reason with total seriousness, certainly if one equates this with discovering a stable reasoned agreement that applies in all times and places. Habermas (1992, p. 144), for example, acknowledges that the concept of communicative reason is associated with a ‘transcendental illusion’ and clarifies that the “the idealizing

presuppositions of communicative action must not be hypostatized into the ideal of a future condition in which a definitive understanding has been reached”, and consequently that the “moment of unconditionality that is preserved in the discursive concepts of a fallibilistic truth and morality is not an absolute”. Similarly, we have already seen that Apel (1999) regards discourses concerning ethical questions to be ongoing and revisable, making it necessary for them “to be opened again and again”. This recognition of fallibility and revisability, and the consequent need to keep the conversation going, is a formula that can be found across a wide range of authors. It forms the basis of Putnam’s view that ethical problems can only be adjudicated and not finally resolved, and that it is a collective commitment to ‘muddling through together’ that is the best we can hope for (Putnam, 1990). It is evident in Ben-Habib’s attempt to reorient a discourse ethics that fully acknowledges the situated character of identities through invoking the twin principles of ‘universal moral respect’ and ‘egalitarian reciprocity’ (Ben-Habib, 1992). The intention is to promote discursive relations which are sensitive to and respect alternative perspectives, where any negotiated consensus is always provisional and open to reappraisal. It can also be detected in Lyotard’s notion of the *differend*, which calls for suppressed perspectives in disputes to be acknowledged rather than silenced (Lyotard, 1986); and again in Derrida’s commentaries on friendship and hospitality (Derrida, 1997, 1999).

That a broadly similar approach to addressing ethical dilemmas has been proposed by theorists of so many different shades raises the question of whether it is really important if one clings to a remnant of grounding rationality or dissolves this entirely in the face of radical undecidability. Following the Pragmatic maxim, it could arguably be claimed that it appears to make no practical difference, although Rorty (2000) has vigorously denied this. Nevertheless, it would seem that the watchword in questions of ethical judgement is negotiation. This stems from the paradox at the centre of the so-called hermeneutic circle, which links ethical considerations closely into questions of intersubjective understanding: mutual understanding is only possible given shared frames of meaning, without which communication is impossible, yet if they coincide exactly then it is unnecessary. The problem comes with attempting to resolve a paradox when all that can be done is to negotiate it. The issue is not either aiming for complete understanding of the ‘other’, or alternatively despairing at the impossibility of any such understanding, but rather about a balanced scepticism which appreciates the limits of (self-)understanding without seeing them as

absolute. It is about understanding and justification as movement towards rather than as destination. As Sonderegger (1997, pp. 204-205, emphasis original) has argued:

The two reading strategies - the 'violent' understanding of a text and the submission to one - both lead, taken in isolation, to a 'bad infinity' in the Hegelian sense: one either sticks fast in impenetrable arrogance, or remains a child forever ... Instead of differentiating between violent and non-violent readings it would be better to think of the whole process of understanding as a violent *conflict*, an irresolvable conflict between two moments that are constitutive of the process of understanding ... Understanding is not a fusion of horizons, or a reconciliation between the interpreter and her 'object'. It is a process of mutual questioning.

Conclusion

It would appear from recent debates on ethics that abandoning the correspondence theory of truth, or even the search for a universal regulative principle for guiding judgements, does not have to lead to despair and inaction. It is quite possible to acknowledge the situated and provisional character of alternative claims, crucially including those made by oneself, and still be committed to exploring competing perspectives in an open and reflexively questioning manner. This is good news for practice-based theories of organisational knowledge because it means that the beneficial influences of Pragmatism and hermeneutics, which have helped to underpin a sophisticated understanding of knowledge as inseparably connected to action, socially-embedded, symbolically mediated, and always emergent and revisable, need not be accompanied by ethical paralysis. Recognising the particular authenticity of local knowledge does not mean that one is bound to agree with the values and judgements of those situated practices, nor that they should be treated as immune from criticism, just as one's own claims are open to objection. However, there are two aspects of the communicative approach to ethics that make it premature to be complacent about the ethical implications of practice-based theory.

The first concerns the need to engage with ethical questions in the first place, without which there is not even a conversation, reconcilable or otherwise, to be kept going. There are certainly indications in practice-based theories that they intend to begin such conversations. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 51), for example, emphasised the critical dimensions of their project in the following terms: "In a theory of practice, cognition and communication in, and with, the social world are situated in the historical development of ongoing activity. It is,

thus, a critical theory; the social scientist's practice must be analyzed in the same historical, situated terms as any other practice under investigation". However, the promise of this critical endeavour largely fails to materialise in subsequent accounts of situated learning (e.g. Wenger, 1998). The same can be said of any sustained treatment of the less positive features of communities of practice, such as power inequalities, restricted access, and pressures on conformity. As Contu and Willmott (2000) and Fox (2000) have argued, these considerations were recognised in Lave and Wenger's earlier work, although hardly explored exhaustively, yet have almost entirely disappeared in more recent statements. In other words, there is little evidence that there has been a fully critical engagement with all aspects of situated learning. The conversation simply has not started. This is made all the more unfortunate because the notion of communities of practice, despite being rooted in a commendable attempt to challenge established views of organisational knowledge, learning, and practice, has now been largely absorbed into an under-examined managerial orthodoxy.

The second reason for not being complacent about the ethical implications of practice-based theory stems from what might be characterised as the displacement of the ethical into a separate sphere where the conditions associated with other domains of knowledge and action apparently do not apply. Certainly, it is reasonable to suggest that there is nothing necessary in the ideas of Pragmatism and hermeneutics that means a workable ethics is untenable, even if it does require continuous maintenance. However, the flip-side of this is equally that there are no guarantees; developing a socially situated theory of knowledge, despite emphasising the interconnectedness of communities of knowing, is no guarantee of ethical conduct. The two elements can, and have been, separated. A good example of this was provided in a keynote speech given by David Snowden (then working for IBM Consulting, now Director of IBM's Cynefin Centre for Organisational Complexity) at a conference a few years ago. Having provided a refined commentary on the situated and culturally-dependent character of knowing, he outlined the practice in IBM of placing anthropologists in work groups, unknown to the other members of the group, in order to record the various stories in circulation. The intention was to identify those stories that could be damaging to the organisation and, if necessary, introduce alternative narratives to 'correct' these rogue perspectives. This is based on a clear acknowledgement of the need to participate in a given practice to develop a rich understanding of the setting and its participants, but, of greater concern, it also offers a worrying illustration of the application of this insight to a programme of control rather than emancipation. It is because the ethical commitment of practice-based

approaches is by no means guaranteed, that those worried about these questions not only need to keep the conversation going; they need to get it started.

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