

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND HEIDEGGER'S ONTOLOGY

Does Philosophy Matter for Information Systems Design?

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Abstract: Organisational learning has gained wide recognition both among academics and practitioners. The need to focus on core knowledge processes and to consider both their tacit and their explicit dimensions has led organisations to value the contributions from socio-philosophy. Heidegger's ontology, in particular, is highly relevant because it radically shifts the attention towards the situated and discursive dimensions of organisational social contexts. This attention, focused on social practices and on language use, has critical implications to information systems design because it addresses the mechanisms through which work systems and their supporting technology help to determine ways of *being*.

1 INTRODUCTION

Organisational learning is part of the broader and more general area of organisational studies. The 'organisational learning' metaphor was first used by Argyris and Schön, in 1978, and then it was popularised by Senge (1990) and others through the concept of the 'learning organisation'. Ever since, we have witnessed a growing interest in this area, both among practitioners and among academicians.

The concept of *learning* is highly complex and culturally marked (Cook, Yanow, 1993). As individuals, we often recognise as learning only external contributions to our knowledge, what someone has taught us. We seldom value the importance of our own experiences, attitudes, efforts, values and previous knowledge that apparently have a far greater importance to the effectiveness of the learning process itself. This is the argument of experiential based perspectives on learning (Dewey, 1938). Our own attitudes and mindset are deeply linked and intertwined with our social environment, again, culturally marked.

The pace of change in our societies, the technological evolution, the globalisation of markets, and the centrality of knowledge, leads organisations to value learning as an ongoing process (Castells, 1998). This learning process, in turn, needs to be understood, valued and mastered.

Living in a society that shows a prevalence for 'individuality' we seldom incorporate the lessons from social theory into everyday organisational practices.

Both management theories, that focus on achieving results, and organisation theories, that focus on the logic and structure, the organisation, that is behind those results, are gradually showing a new interest in the social aspects of human interaction. This situation is particularly important for knowledge-intensive organisations, or knowledge-based, that can be described as organisations where knowledge is valued and understood as their core competence (Drucker, 1999). Knowledge, within this context, is interpreted in a broad form incorporating technical, and explicit and tacit elements (Polanyi, 1958), as well as cultural and social aspects (Cook, Yanow, 1993, Gherardi, Nicolini, 2001, Elkjaer, 2003). When studying collective activity, behaviour and explicit knowledge are the main visible elements. However, behind observable behaviour we have meanings and motives that direct and determine people's actions and decision-making processes (Gherardi, Nicolini, 2001). Organisational learning has to be understood and analysed in a way that is consistent with this background of social key concepts.

Organisational learning plays an active role in every organisation as it is, in itself, a condition for

survival. Organisational learning already exists, spontaneously and implicitly (Dixon, 2000). As Burgoyne (1995) jokingly argues, organisational learning, like the health state of individuals, "is always there"; however, its quality and degree of consciousness in relation to its actual state may vary.

2 HEIDEGGER'S ONTOLOGY

Probably one of the most interesting and illuminating ways to grasp meaning creation within a community is through Martin Heidegger's [1889-1976] thought. Heidegger's work *Being and Time* (1996), first published in 1927, in which he defines the notion of 'being-in-the-world', proposes a radically innovative ontology that has changed the course of development of phenomenology, contemporary hermeneutics and social philosophy.

Heidegger's philosophy is centred on the question of Being, and it develops a complex account of our *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1996). Heidegger believed that Western philosophy had lost touch with the important questions of human existence. He gave an urgent account of the human search for the significance of our own "being", and of human life as a search for its own meaning and identity, unaided by any external authority or fixed values (Guignon, 1983). Heidegger's phenomenology of everydayness works to counteract the tendency toward the displacement of meaning into subjectivity, which began with the rise of modern science. By regarding the self as nothing other than its meaningful expressions, Heidegger is able to fully break away from the Cartesian tradition (Guignon, 1983).

Since the seventeenth century there has been a growth in interest in knowledge and cognition which rose from the earlier development of modern science in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Knowledge had always been important to humankind but this knowledge was previously understood as being implicitly contextualised and embedded, while in modern age it acquired as if a life of its own, independent and autonomous from the contexts from which it emerged. This process is explained by Guignon (1983), an expert on Heidegger's ontology who claims that, with modernity, the epistemological question gained precedence above the ontological concern, and that the importance of Heidegger's monumental work is related with this shift in perspectives.

Ontological concerns are inseparable from the contexts where knowledge processes take place (Guignon, 1983). In technical terms, with modern

age, the epistemologic concern of "knowledge about knowledge" became priority. The ontological question of the context of such knowledge, and of who and what is this being whose knowledge is being considered, was neglected (Guignon, 1983). Guignon (1983), based on Heidegger's work, argues that any epistemology is necessarily based on certain ontological assumptions, and though these may be unacknowledged and unidentified they can never stop being present. The dominance of epistemic concerns over ontological ones needs to be balanced in favour of further comprehension of reality as a whole, and of the ontological dimensions of knowledge (Guignon, 1983).

Heidegger's (1996) ontology developed from Husserl's phenomenology, which explicitly calls attention not to individuals in isolation but to the individual in context. Individuals are constantly affected, determined and conditioned by surrounding circumstances. There is a change of perspective in phenomenological studies so that the focus of attention goes to the overall environment, and to the social embeddedness and continuous networks of relationships which take place in such environment.

Almost every great philosophical work carries with it a more or less explicit reinterpretation of the nature of philosophy and the methods appropriate to fulfilling its aims. As was referred above, Heidegger shifts his orientation from epistemology to ontology (Guignon, 1983). For Heidegger, the basic theme of philosophy is being. The question of Being has this central position because any inquiry into one of the areas of philosophy, e.g., epistemology, logic, ethics, or aesthetics, operates within a tacit set of presuppositions about the being of the entities with which it deals (Guignon, 1983). What is true of the discipline of philosophy holds for the sciences as well. Every science presupposes some conception of the Being of the entities that are the objects of its inquiry. The ontologies of the regional sciences, Heidegger says, have already been worked out "roughly and naively" on the basis of our prescientific ways of interpreting and experimenting domains of being (Heidegger 1996, Guignon, 1983). Scientists work within frameworks that determine in advance what sorts of question are appropriate and what kinds of answer will make sense. Generally, there is no need for scientists to question the ontological frameworks in which they work. During periods of crisis in science, however, it is precisely these frameworks that are called in question (Guignon, 1983).

When what are at issue in the sciences are no longer questions within the frameworks of those sciences but the very frameworks themselves, the

ontological presuppositions of the regional inquiries must be made explicit (Heidegger 1996, Guignon, 1983). Heidegger believes that philosophy alone can fulfil this role. Philosophy that he sees as not itself being bound by any framework, and which is the study of frameworks in general. The inquiry into the Being of entities in general Heidegger calls “ontology taken in the widest sense” (Heidegger 1996, Guignon, 1983). It is a “science of *Being as such*”, and its task is to provide “a genealogy of the different possible ways of Being”. Ontology in the widest sense lays out the conditions for the possibility of any science. And philosophy, as ontology in the widest sense, is the “science of sciences” (Heidegger 1996, Guignon, 1983).

The Anglo-American tradition, according to Guignon (1983), generally tends to see philosophy as a set of current topics or problems that are to be discussed within pre-given frameworks. The method is argument and counter-argument along tacitly agreed-upon guidelines. In contrast, Heidegger maintains that it is these philosophical frameworks themselves that are the source of traditional philosophical problems (Heidegger 1996, Guignon, 1983).

Heidegger devoted a lot of time to the idea of “being-with”, and talking and communicating was one way to be with others: «Discoursing or talking is the way we articulate “significantly” the intelligibility of being-in-the-world.» (Heidegger, 1996). Discourse, for Heidegger, is broader than talk, including all our inner and outer expression which plays the same role as talking. According to Guignon (1983), in Heidegger’s perspective, talk and discourse «do not have the purpose of transmitting messages of information, are not ways of getting things we want more efficiently, and do not give expression to “me-I”» (Guignon, 1983). Rather, talk and discourse have the purpose of finding significance and of sharing understanding, and give expression to human *being-in-the-world* (Guignon, 1983).

Heidegger (1996) refers to *discursiveness*, *situatedness* and *understanding* as the basic elements of rationalisation, i.e. how human beings spontaneously use their rationality in everyday situations, therefore including philosophical and scientific reasoning circumstances as special cases within this everyday use (Guignon, 1983). Heidegger’s ontology is profoundly marked by this common use of rationalisation processes.

«If we are to understand the full import of Heidegger’s conception of ‘meaning’, then, we must avoid seeing it as referring to something inner in any sense... Heidegger identifies three existentialia of what is called ‘Being-in as such’: situatedness,

understanding, and discursiveness... Meaning is that which makes possible that projection of possibilities in understanding... What is the source of this most primordial level of intelligibility? Heidegger says that it is ‘discursiveness’. The concepts of ‘discursiveness’ and ‘meaning’ are closely related, so to clarify one is at the same time to illuminate the other.» (Guignon, 1983).

Heidegger’s concepts allow for a rich interpretation of the critical role of community life for human beings’ organisation within a society, a culture and a civilisation (Guignon, 1983). Life in the knowledge economy of the information age (Castells, 1998) continues to be grounded in the same network of communities, and of social and cultural embedded meaning creation processes. Heidegger sees the world as expressing the aims and interests of a culture (Guignon, 1983). This implies that the concepts of “discursiveness” and of “meaning” are closely related (Heidegger, 1996). Social subjectivity becomes a central concept:

«To be Dasein is essentially to be a nexus of the socially constituted relations of a culture... Heidegger’s phenomenology of everydayness works to counteract the tendency toward the displacement of meaning into subjectivity which began with the rise of modern science.» (Guignon, 1983).

3 RELEVANT APPLICATIONS

Outside the academic discipline of philosophy there is a growing interest in the kind of ontological approach to human phenomena that Heidegger helped to establish and to define in its modern form. According to Guignon (1983), the works of post-structuralists thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault may be understood as responses to Heideggerian philosophy. Heidegger’s work was a critique to traditional epistemology, and his thought provides a key that opens up a wide range of problems and presuppositions built into the Cartesian tradition. Heidegger’s method breaks with traditional philosophy to the extent that it is concerned less with discovering obvious truths and providing proofs than with unearthing the underlying meaning in what is manifest in our normal lives.

K. Jaspers philosophy followed Heidegger’s ideas and argued that only in “communication” could man “become himself” (Young-Bruehl, 1981). J. Habermas’ (1984) theory of communicative action is also deeply rooted in Heidegger’s work. For Habermas, to become more modern means to become more rational. He stresses that communicative rationality is about the achievement

of shared understandings through language and other means of communication, and it is about being open to criticism, and able to give good reasons for our own beliefs, decisions and actions (Habermas, 1984).

R. Rorty (1979), an American philosopher of the analytic tradition and a postmodernist, considers Heidegger, together with Wittgenstein and Dewey, the three most important philosophers of the twentieth century. Heidegger's (1996) ontology has influenced both organisational learning studies, through the works of authors who explicitly focused on social perspectives on learning (eg. Cook, Yanow, 1993, Gherardi, Nicolini, 2001, Elkjaer, 2003) and computing science research, namely through the works of Maturana and Varela (1980) and Winograd and Flores (1986).

Heidegger's work *Being and Time* (1996) influenced Maturana and Varela's work (1980) and through them the work of Winograd and Flores (1986), thus setting a tradition in computing science and information systems design. Against a Cartesian view of human beings as purely autonomous and rational, perfectly in control of their consciousness, Heidegger's perspective on "situatedness" calls upon the importance of human's relationships with our world and our surrounding environment. From this perspective, information systems designers may acknowledge the importance of their influence on work systems and, through these systems, their influence on the individual and the collective users of the system.

Winograd and Flores (1986), following Maturana and Varela's work, explicitly refer to the influence of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1996). Of "comprehension that takes place in situations of involvement in a practice when subject and object are not separated" (Gherardi, Nicolini, 2001). They explain their rationale the following way:

«All new technologies develop within a background of a tacit understanding of human nature and human work. The use of technology in turn leads to fundamental changes in what we do, and ultimately in what it is to be human. We encounter the deep questions of design when we recognise that in designing tools we are designing ways of being. By confronting these questions directly, we can develop a new background for understanding computer technology – one that can lead to important advances in the design and use of computer systems.» (Winograd, Flores, 1986).

Through Heidegger's *being-in-the-world*, it is possible to promote and raise the awareness towards the relatedness and sociality of human intellectual enterprises.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The complexity of current organisational contexts forces researchers and practitioners to explore new boundaries and knowledge domains. Sociophilosophy is critical if there is the recognition of the central role of social and cultural factors in determining informal organisational practices. Information systems design has developed pioneer work related with Heidegger's ontology, and it is crucial that this achievement is recognised, disseminated and further developed.

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