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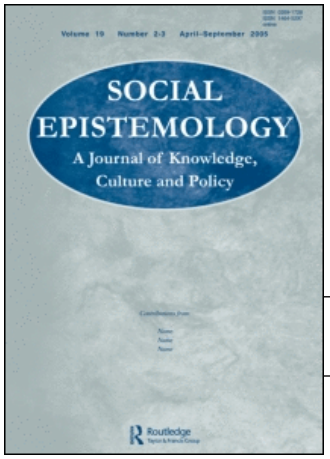

Social Epistemology
A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713765921

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Online Publication Date: 01 April 2007

To cite this Article: McKenna, Bernard, Rooney, David and Bos, René ten (2007) 'Wisdom as the Old Dog… With New Tricks', Social Epistemology, 21:2, 83 — 86

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/02691720701393392
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02691720701393392

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Social Epistemology
Vol. 21, No. 2, April–June 2007, pp. 83–86

Routledge

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EDITORIAL

Wisdom as the Old Dog… With New Tricks

Bernard McKenna, David Rooney and René ten Bos

While wisdom is occasionally mentioned in management research and practice, it has not been explicitly integrated into its conceptual frameworks. Wisdom in the popular imagination seems to be positively regarded, much like an ageing and faithful family dog that has accompanied us on many walks but now mostly lies sometimes wistfully, sometimes lugubriously, in its favourite corner of the house until it is put out at night. The dog is well regarded, nostalgically remembered but not all that useful if the truth be known. The small, but emerging literature on wisdom in management seems also to regard it as something we should have, a desirable attribute in people. But what is it, particularly in a management context? Why is it good? While we can physically describe and categorize *canis lupus familiaris*, wisdom is less easy to articulate. Yet, most people have an understanding of what wisdom is, and can separate it from cunning, wiliness or smart-alecry, but they may be hard pressed as to why it is fondly thought of or what is practical about it in everyday life.

These questions motivated our call for a stream, Wisdom, Ethics, Stupidity and Management, at the Fourth International Critical Management Studies Conference held in July 2005 at Cambridge University, UK. One might think that the time is not particularly propitious for such musings at a management studies conference given the hegemonic discourses and practices that infuse contemporary organizations: neo-classical economic orthodoxy where market forces and utility value determine action; neo-liberalism, which valorises individuality, entrepreneurship, the self and self-regulation; and ontological and ethical relativism, which devalues fixity and tradition as the strictures of grand narratives.

However, there are signs that people are coming to understand the more ludicrous, even harmful, aspects of contemporary private, workplace and organizational practices. Management practitioners and researchers have been urged to turn away from the technical, control-obsessed, short-sighted approach and turn to more people-oriented humanistic values in organizations (Aktouf 1992). Management, organization and leadership research is now revealing a discontent not just with the direction of

ISSN 0269–1728 (print)/ISSN 1464–5297 (online) © 2007 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/02691720701393392

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research and practice, but with the paradigmatic framework itself: the ontological assumptions, the inherent ideology and the isomorphic routines. As ten Bos suggests in his paper, the possibilities of stupidity actually increase the more complex and "clever" our processes become. It is one thing to cut the Gordian knot—it was not untied, remember—but quite another to tether the ox-cart with another rope and to re-set its direction.

It is our proposition that wisdom be established as the ideal of organizational practice and that practices be measured against that ideal. However, we need to be careful in putting this proposition forward for four reasons. Firstly, the concept of wisdom needs to be rigorously challenged at all times to avoid it becoming a motherhood claim that mutes all resistance in the way that propositions introduced by "It's just common sense that…" immediately render resistors and sceptics as outsiders, as silly or, worse, saboteurs and traitors. Secondly, the other hazard of wisdom as a motherhood statement is that it becomes what people want it to be, such as when politicians talk earnestly, often when remembering wars or excluding others from citizenship, of their country's special "values". Thirdly, as an ideal, wisdom is analogue not digital. In spite of all managerial pretensions to it, wisdom is not something that can be easily measured or that comes linearly. It is complex and unstable. It is domain-specific and is, therefore, likely to be different in different domains. Finally, wisdom is uneven; there are degrees of wisdom as the common retrospective expression "that wasn't so wise" indicates. It also depends on experience and knowledge. People can act more or less wisely in different domains of activity because of varying experience, knowledge and aptitudes: thus, a wise manager may not be a particularly wise parent. In other words, the danger of attaining our hope that *wisdom* becomes a naturalised part of organizational discourse is also the point at which such a concept is in danger of terminal failure or meaninglessness.

That is why this special issue not only puts forward a proposal—we did strongly resist the epithet, *clarion call*—that wisdom becomes both an overarching ideal towards which all our endeavour in applying knowledge to the specifics of life is directed but also becomes a process in everyday life. In this issue, the particular human endeavour we are concerned with is organizational management.

Case and Gosling's wide-ranging paper philosophically analyses the concept of "wisdom". They not only consider the relationship between eastern and western outlooks and ethical dispositions, but then provide a strong case for Pierre Hadot's radical reinterpretation of the place of wisdom within the ancient world. They test this with a brief case study of an executive at work to suggest that Stoical wisdom may best describe much contemporary leadership practice.

Rooney and McKenna survey the decline of wisdom in dominant discourses, including business discourse. They argue that while wisdom has always and must always exist, it has nevertheless declined in status. Since the scientific revolution, rationalism and scientific method have been privileged epistemologies and wisdom has been relegated to the status of untrustworthy mysticism, irrationality and art. Finally, Rooney and McKenna survey a range of managerial functions and speculate on the place of wisdom in each.

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Ten Bos approaches wisdom from an entirely differently angle by arguing that any understanding of wisdom cannot circumvent reflection on what seems to be wisdom's counterpart: stupidity. He provocatively claims that, for all managerial endeavours to keep stupidity at bay, for example, under the banner of concepts such as "knowledge management" or "learning company", organizational life is indelibly stupid. Indeed, it is only a matter of wisdom to acknowledge what he refers to as the vitality of stupidity.

Statler, Roos and Victor put the proposition that, as the business landscape becomes more volatile, strategy practitioners need to develop more sophisticated strategy models that supersede "strategy as a plan" from the scientific management paradigm. The specifications for such new models that can adaptively respond to such mutability must include a dynamic ontology. They find in Aristotle's concept of prudence, or practical wisdom, useful insights into dynamic ontologies. This means that a strategic response should certainly take into account the "knowledge" that exists about a particular phenomenon but that adaptive capacities are also needed in rapidly changing times. Furthermore, inherent in such a philosophical approach is the assumption that we must act virtuously so that our decisions and actions promote the "good life" for the "polis".

Küpers presents a multidimensional phenomenological theory of wisdom. This approach sees the relational process as central to wisdom at individual and group levels. Practical wisdom is presented as a way of being or, rather, becoming, based on an integral pheno-practice in which its interior and exterior dimensions are acknowledged at the same time as its individual and collective components. The challenge for practitioners, then, is to understand that the interconnected processes of intentional, behavioural, cultural and systemic domains of wisdom are integrated. In light of this view, wisdom is able to be seen as decentred and as a constant process of becoming.

Roca explains the value of understanding practical wisdom as a sensory ability. She is critical of business ethicists who place an unwarranted emphasis on the rational aspects of the Aristotelian philosophical system. Using Levinas's notions of "face" and "other" in moral judgement to bring out the conflictual aspect of being prudential, practical wisdom is described as a human "sense" that can be put to good use in contemporary organizations.

This special issue, then, does strongly assert that the old dog, wisdom, has much to offer us in contemporary circumstances. It shows that wisdom can be practically applied, and there could hardly be a tougher testing arena than business and modern organizations to show that this is so. Nonetheless, clearly there is much research to be done yet. Apart from the theoretical and philosophical issues raised in this issue, there is a whole domain of empirical study (e.g. Ardelt 2003; Baltes and Kunzmann 2003; Baltes and Staudinger 2000; Staudinger, Lopez, and Baltes 1997; Staudinger and Pasupathi 2003; Sternberg 1998, 2004; Sternberg and Ben-Zeev 2001) that has not been directly considered here. It is our hope that within and across disciplinary boundaries, theoretical and empirical researchers will be motivated to contribute to the wisdom debate.

Bernard McKenna, David Rooney and René ten Bos

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