‘Where is the Wisdom We Have Lost in Knowledge?
A Stoical Perspective on Personal Knowledge Management’

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Introduction

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the Wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the Knowledge we have lost in information?
(Eliot 1985 [1934])

This extract from the chorus of T.S. Eliot’s *The Rock* captures rather elegantly the problematic that we wish to address in this paper. For developed and developing economies alike, *information* seems to have been elevated to a status that has no historical precedent. Continuing an exponential trend facilitated by innovations in information and communications technology (ICT) that began in the latter part of the twentieth century, the information revolution continues apace. Information saturates our lives. It proliferates at speeds and in quantities that quite literally boggle the individual and collective mind, invading every sphere of activity in an inexorable colonization of private and public spaces. These trends have tempted some authors, quite reasonably it might seem, to view information as a defining characteristic of emerging ‘information societies’ (Castells 2001) populated by ‘knowledge workers’ (Drucker 1999) who occupy roles in ‘infomated organizations’ (Zuboff 1988). Quite often, as in the case of the authors just cited, the information revolution is understood as heralding liberating potential for individuals, organizations and societies. It offers new freedoms and possibilities for personal exploration, reflection, education and collective organization (through virtual interaction, virtual teamwork, virtual organization, etc.). Proponents of the liberating possibilities of the Internet and World Wide Web also point to the prospect of a collective ICT-mediated politics, with promises of enhanced participative democracy, shared decision-making, mass involvement, and so forth.

While we would certainly not deny the reality of information’s ascendancy in contemporary societies, we would suggest – following Eliot’s prescient poetic insight – that the lived reality of an information saturated life may detract from the optimistic promises of its enthusiastic proponents. If we take the case of organizational roles, for example, many individuals and groups struggle to cope with the sheer deluge of information which ICTs facilitate on a daily (if not moment-by-moment) basis. Electronic mail is a particular culprit in this respect. From our experience as educators and consultants working with managers and leaders, there seems to be a common desire to escape the perceived tyranny of the email ‘In-Box’. In the information and knowledge-managed economy, many lives are now shackled by email communication and the demands of instantaneous responses every bit as much as they were chained, in previous generations, by the relentless pace of the assembly line. Although, of course, the external conditions of employment may well have improved considerably, the stress of being regulated by others’ technologically-mediated expectations is there for all to experience.

What, then, might be the implications for *personal* knowledge management (PKM) of the post-modern privileging of information? To gain some perspective on the question, we suggest, it will be useful to mount a brief historical critique – in the space available - of the development of knowledge and information. Firstly, it is necessary, we contend, to be able to discriminate between ‘information’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ in order to explore the possibilities and dynamics represented by PKM. As part of this definitional work, we review the development of knowledge, firstly, in
a post-Enlightenment context (which has witnessed the privileging of cognition and rationality over other forms of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’); and, secondly, in a premodern context within which wisdom, intuition and virtue played as important a part of the ‘knowledge’ alembic as cognition.

The French classicist Pierre Hadot has traced a genealogy of monastic Christian philosophy and practice back through neo-Platonist transition to origins in the classical schools of Ancient Greece (Hadot 1995, 2006). He demonstrates that monastic Scholasticism led to a bifurcation of philosophy and theology which paved the way for modern conceptions of knowledge which privilege ratio over intuitive wisdom and other forms of contemplative understanding. This bifurcation made possible the occlusion of mystical knowledge that characterized the Enlightenment quest for secular scientific knowledge and is a legacy which, of course, remains with us to the present day. In the pre-Renaissance world, intellectus – the notion that understanding could come from direct intuitive insight – was balanced by the faculty of ratio, or what we might now take to be discursive reason (Brient 2001). There was an appreciation of how virtue and wisdom, which had at its core a relatively unselfish or other-directed disposition, could arise out of contemplation of truth. Virtue and faith came from simplex intuitus, that is the direct intuition or apprehension of the moral good obtained from understanding the principles of a natural order ordained by God. In this sense ratio was in the service of intellectus, virtue, faith and wisdom.

Our contention is that the wisdom which was fundamental to pre-classical understandings of knowledge and virtue has been lost in the post-Enlightenment drive to reveal and represent rational truth. We seek in the first few sections of this paper to indicate how this loss occurred before proceeding to develop a more contextual and personalized understanding of the term ‘knowledge’. With respect to organizational life, we suggest that it might be helpful to construe knowledge as finding the ‘person-in-role’ rather than simply as a free-floating ‘resource’ or possessions of autonomous individual occupants of roles. The paper concludes with a discussion of Stoicism and suggests that its prescriptions with respect to ‘philosophy as a way of life’ (Hadot 1995) contain practical means by which a PKM agenda might be taken forward.

**Knowledge and Personal Knowledge**

To attempt a full critique of knowledge in one brief contribution such as this would be, at best, overly ambitious and, at worst, absurdly ostentatious. Nonetheless, to advance the argument we want to make with respect to PKM we must give some attention, albeit cursory, to the modern understanding of knowledge. Studies of epistemology, of course, constitute one of the major branches of philosophy and it will not be possible to survey the entirety of this tradition. Suffice it to say that within post-Enlightenment philosophy knowledge is generally equated with an exclusively rational and cognitive conception of ‘justified true belief’. This notion underpins the search for true propositional statements and much of western philosophy has been preoccupied with attempting to derive rational criteria, principles and methods for establishing truth and justification. Yet, the central notion of ‘belief’ restricts any resulting conception of knowledge to the domain of cognition, however sophisticated the reasoning that supports ‘justification’ and ‘truth’.
If we turn to definitions of knowledge within the social sciences, we find, perhaps unsurprisingly, a similar dependency on rationality and cognition. To take one seminal epistemological contribution as illustration, in his book *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society* Daniel Bell defines knowledge as: ‘a set of organized statements of facts or ideas, presenting a reasoned judgement or an experimental result, which is transmitted to others through some communication medium in some systematic form’ (Bell 1999, 175, added emphases). Modern social scientific definitions, of which Bell’s is typical, thus draw on a post-Kantian philosophical tradition that prioritises reason and judgement with respect to knowledge. If our beliefs are founded upon reason, itself supported by evidence, we are justified in treating them as true and sharing the resulting knowledge. Bell’s definition of knowledge is broadly representative of the rational consensus within social science which we shall be at pains to challenge in this paper. His interrogation of epistemology, nonetheless, does acknowledge the role to the ‘personal’ in knowledge creation. This aspect of his study is particularly germane to our discussion of PKM. Bell (1999, lxi-lxiv) distinguishes between *data*, considered to be an ordered sequence of items or events; *information* which introduces more context into the arrangement of data and indicates the relationships between elements; and *knowledge* which involves personal judgement concerning the significance of the information within a given context. Hence, data, information and knowledge may be arranged along a continuum according to the degree to which there is personal human involvement with, and interpretation of, reality.

Bell’s admission of the part played by personal judgement with respect to the interpretation of data and information bears a family resemblance to the more or less contemporaneous views of Michael Polanyi (Polanyi 1958, 1966, 1975). As the editors of the current volume acknowledge, the field of PKM is yet to flourish in its own right and yet its embryonic emergence must surely owe a great debt to Polanyi’s intellectual tour de force *Personal Knowledge* (Polanyi 1958). Michael Polanyi was a highly successful natural scientist before his mid-career migration to the social sciences. This talented polymath was able to bring his intellectual powers to bear, with great effect, on epistemological issues faced within social science. Somewhat surprisingly for a thinker schooled and expert in natural scientific method, Polanyi made a strident case for acknowledging the part played by personal judgement in the formation of both individual and collective knowledge. Rather than advance the idea of value-neutral science and social science, Polanyi claimed that all knowledge is inevitably pervaded by personal values, commitments and contextually conditioned understanding. Moreover, he challenged the received wisdom which simply equated knowledge with post-Enlightenment notions of ‘justified true belief’, an intellectual project which is roundly reflected in the following assertion:

> Tearing away the paper screen of graphs, equations and computations, I have tried to lay bare the inarticulate manifestations of intelligence by which we know things in a purely personal manner. I have entered on an analysis of the arts of skilful doing and skilful knowing, the exercise of which guides and accredits the use of scientific formulae, and which ranges far further afield, unassisted by any formalism, in shaping our fundamental notions of most things which make our world (Polanyi 1958, 64, added emphases).

In one sense, as we shall see shortly, Polanyi can be viewed as having rediscovered or re-intuited certain classical forms of knowledge that had, to that point, been relatively neglected within the western epistemological tradition. For Polanyi, human judgement may be inscribed or embodied in collective human forms but,
nonetheless, has to find expression in personal interpretations of signification at the individual level. Humans participate in, or, to use Polanyi’s term, indwell complex socio-material contexts. To this extent, therefore: ‘All knowing is personal knowing – participation through indwelling’ (Polanyi 1975, 44, original emphasis). This leads to a recognition and acknowledgement of the ‘artful’ nature of doing and knowing. If it is accepted that personal participation is a ‘universal principle of knowing (Polanyi 1975, 44), then knowledge – a noun which Polanyi prefers to render actively as ‘knowing’ – will always be a skilful, context-based, accomplishment. An important dimension of Polanyi’s work is dedicated to a phenomenological enquiry into the foundation of human knowing. In this respect, his project is not dissimilar to that of the philosophical explorations of Heidegger (see Heidegger 1962). Indeed, in Polanyi’s attempt to differentiate between explicit cognitive and tacit non-cognitive dimensions of knowing, he uses examples, such as the use of a hammer, which directly parallel those employed in Heidgger’s magnum opus Being and Time. Tacit knowledge is akin to Aristotle’s intellectual virtue technē. It is, as it were, an embodied form of knowledge; a skill, such as riding a bicycle or playing a musical instrument, which has passed the threshold of rational cognition and become established at a deeper, bodily and subconscious, level. Indeed, if such embodied skills get questioned by the thinking function, the result can be quite disastrous for the person performing a given task. The introduction of rational self-consciousness can easily cause the pianist to stumble clumsily over notes, the rider to fall off a bicycle, or the artisan to strike her own thumb as she attempts to strike a nail. The encroachment of the rationally explicit into the domain of the tacit results in a form of paralysing ‘stage fright’ (Polanyi 1958, 56).

Knowledge Management and Organizational Knowledge

Having suggested that it is important to appreciate the tacit, embodied and participative dimensions of knowledge, we turn now to the question of how knowledge is treated in contemporary organizational discourse and practice. This will necessitate some analysis of theories associated with ‘knowledge management’ (KM) and ‘organizational knowledge’. If we are concerned to advance a PKM agenda, how might the ‘personal’ augment or articulate with KM? In order to answer this question, we shall need, paradoxically, to suspend consideration of the personal dimension of PKM in order to focus on approaches that de-personalize knowledge in the interests of supra-personal organizational ends.

KM defies simple definition, but appears to consist in a network of principles, methods and practices that, mediated by ICT, are intended to facilitate the instrumental exploitation of knowledge within organizations (Scarborough and Swan 2001). Nonaka, one of the most well-known architects of KM, outlines a programme of ‘encoding’ knowledge in order that it can be readily shared and disseminated throughout organizational networks (Nonaka 1994). Within Nonaka’s scheme, knowledge is not restricted exclusively to ideas (explicit knowledge) since it seeks consciously to embrace differing forms of organizational skills (tacit knowledge). Despite acknowledging the role of tacit knowledge, Nonaka’s emphasis is still on the codification (externalization) and communication (socialization and internalization) of such knowledge. In practice, this has been widely interpreted as involving the use of
information technologies to facilitate objective and objectifying shared understandings.

Several critics of Nonaka’s and related technology-led approaches to KM have pointed to the limitations of seeking to codify tacit knowledge and constraints which ICTs, owing to their calculative configuration, invariably introduce (Blackler 1995; Cabrera and Cabrera 2002; Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001; Thompson and Walsham 2004). In short, naïve resource-based understandings of organizational knowledge upon which KM is predicated carry certain risks. They may simply be ineffective and unable to deliver on their promises thus representing a waste of capital investment on ICT equipment and training, or, in more serious cases, result in counterproductive interventions that actually damage extant practices. Thompson and Walsham, for example, provide a graphic case study account of a software development company which dismantled what had been an effective informal process of knowledge sharing in favour of a KM system designed to objectify these processes using ICT (Thompson and Walsham 2004). They describe how the former ‘Bardic’ tradition, which propagated and sustained organizational knowledge through relationships that were sensitive to the social context, was destroyed by the KM system.

This cautionary tale speaks to various concerns about resource-based, instrumental and narrowly utilitarian conceptions of organizational knowledge and KM. In their comprehensive and critical appraisal of discourse and practice, for example, Scarborough and Swan conclude that KM, ‘has helped IS [information systems] specialists to legitimate and mobilize management support for organizational change programmes aimed at using IT to capture and codify knowledge. The ‘softer’ side of KM – that which focuses on the accumulation of intellectual capital through the development of skills and competencies – has often been lost in these initiatives’ (Scarborough and Swan 2001, 10). This observation, of course, invites questions as to just what practices the euphemistic ‘softer side’ of KM might involve and, moreover, what alternatives there might be to disembodied, apolitical and timeless conceptions of knowledge represented within KM of the instrumental variety.

One set of answers to such questions would entail following Polanyi’s lead and reintroducing both the personal and the contextual into conceptions of knowledge and KM. Examples of more sophisticated interpretations of organizational knowledge would include the work of Blackler and Tsoukas and Vladimirou (Blackler 1995; Tsoukas and Valdimirou 2001). Blackler, for instance offers a typology of knowledge that views collective understanding – itself predicated on the interpenetration of multiple personal understandings – as being culturally embedded in firms or other forms of organization, enabling them to deploy resources in particular ways. By acknowledging both an individual and collective dimension of knowledge, Blacker identifies four classes of knowledge thus: individual-explicit (embrained), individual-tacit (embodied), collective-explicit (encoded) and collective-tacit (encultured or embedded). A similar degree of complexity and interdependency between the personal and the collective is acknowledged by Tsoukas and Vladimirou in their characterization of organizational knowledge as, ‘the capability members of an organization have developed to draw distinctions in the process of carrying out their work, in particular concrete contexts, by enacting sets of generalizations (propositional statements) whose application depends on historically evolved
collective understandings and experiences (Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001, 983, original emphases).

Thompson and Walsham take the critique of KM further than Tsoukas and Vladimirou by claiming that the subjective nature of personal knowledge inevitably resists instrumental management within relational social contexts. Indeed, the implication of Thompson and Walsham’s argument seems to be that the search for KM based on unitarist notions of ‘shared knowledge’ must inexorably flounder on the sands of organizational complexity. As they put it, ‘the meaning of any objective ‘knowledge’ will always remain the subjective product of the person in whose mind this is constituted, always relationally defined, and therefore does not transfer easily to others in a form which may be operationalized to the benefit of the organization’ (Thompson and Walsham 2001, 726, original emphases). A common thread to the critique of instrumental forms of KM is the accusation that, in their idealistic efforts to instantiate objective forms of shareable knowledge within organizations, they neglect sufficiently to account for personal and social contexts. It follows that if we are to integrate the ‘personal’ within ‘knowledge management’ to produce a hybrid PKM, we should seek to establish an indexical understanding of these three terms. In other words, we must have a rounded appreciation of PKM’s possibilities within organizational contexts. It is to the question of what that appreciation might entail that we now turn.

Personal Knowledge: Role and Discipline

The heuristic of ‘person-in-role’ attained a central position in open-systems theory, alongside those of ‘primary task’ and ‘boundary’, (Miller and Rice, 1967) when extended from the original socio-technical systems work of Trist and Bamforth (1951). Open systems theory considers organised work as a conversion of inputs to outputs. The conversion process is the primary task of the system, for which roles are defined and allocated to role-holders (persons-in-roles). One of the responsibilities of those in managerial roles is to regulate the transfer of inputs into the system, and outputs from the system; this is one aspect of boundary management – the other being the responsibility of every role-holder to manage the boundary between self and role.

This could appear a very mechanistic model of human work and organisation, but, of course, the intellectual influence of open systems theory has been significant precisely because of its ability to accommodate cultural, social and political forces, inter- and intra-psychic dynamics as well as the transformation of material goods and services. For example, in a hospice as an open system, the outputs include cadavers, reassured relatives and various waste products. Inputs include terminally ill patients, trained staff and material resources such as medicines, food, funding, etc.; in addition to these more obvious inputs, the system must cope with anxiety about death amongst patients and relatives, anxiety about the ability to care on behalf of staff, social attitudes towards death, hope for a blessed relief from suffering and guilt associated with abandoning the dying to an institution; and many other unconscious or partially acknowledged projections and introjections. The primary task of the hospice as a system is to care for the dying, and the task of managers is to organise roles and sub-tasks to this end. To do so, managers must find ways to cope with the immaterial and uninvited inputs of anxiety, hope, etc., as well as the formal and intended inputs.
Often, systems evolve ways of working that are adapted to handle high levels of anxiety even at the expense of what might on paper appear to be more efficient modes of organising: an insight which gave rise to the term ‘Social systems as a defence against anxiety’ (Menzies, 1975)

Another source of inputs to an open system is the people who take up roles within it. In addition to the skills, attitudes, behaviours, contacts, symbolic referents and competences for which any of us might be formally appointed to a role, we bring our personal propensities, emotions, prejudices, anxieties; and also conscious and unconscious knowledge associated with other aspects of our social life – race, gender and age are just some of the more obvious factors. A role is not a fixed entity, and will always flex to a certain extent to accommodate the person who fills it – less so for commoditised labour than for bourgeois or entrepreneurial roles. Managing oneself in role therefore involves managing the possible developments of the role in relation to other roles and to the primary task of the system. Managers of a system regulate this role flexibility, and provide the conditions in which role holders manage themselves and all that they bring with them into the role. Figure 1 provides an indication of how we are conceiving this.

[insert figure 1 here - portrait]

Conceived in this way, ‘managing oneself in role’ is a collaborative venture shared by the person-in-role, other role holders, the managers of the system, and the embedded systems and informal processes that have evolved to handle both the formal and unconscious inputs to the system. In open systems theory the personal knowledge required to undertake the work of ‘managing oneself in role’ is usually framed as consciousness raising (Lawrence, 1979) and informed by methodologies such as ‘process consultancy’, group psychodynamics or (with more of an engineering bias) Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1965), explicitly drawing on the politics of workplace democracy that played a formative role in the development of this body of theory.

As we argued above, the employability of knowledge is problematic. Not all knowledge exists ready for the taking; in addition to that which is tacit, much of it is dynamically active in the unconscious of individuals and collectives, so that people and institutions unknowingly ‘act out’. This might include anxieties raised by anomie, uncertainty or social fixedness, for example; as well as other forms of tacit knowledge about how to do things. Further, some knowledge touches the unknowable, or bleeds seamlessly into the inscrutable – such as knowledge of death, of love, of wholeness, and of dependency.

Thus a person taking up a role in an organisation must deal with various kinds of knowledge that goes with that role. For example, someone talking a role in the front line of a pro-democracy demonstration in Myanmar will have to manage knowledge of fear and mortality, along with all the other aspects of the role. Such a person is likely to manage this awareness by mobilising sentiments of bravura, solidarity, group enthusiasm, and so forth, all of which may be mobilised as if automatically and subconsciously (Chapman and Long, 2008).
So when we consider the relatedness of person to role, we are constructing these two entities for purely heuristic reasons – to try to appreciate a nexus of knowledge-management between social and political forces on one hand, and intimate personal dynamics on the other. Personal knowledge cannot be understood if we concern ourselves only with what is the conscious possession of the individual; we must also consider the awareness or knowingness that comes into being through the availability of a person in a role. In other words, we are concerned with contextual knowledge in search of a knower, just as much as with intelligent individuals in search of knowledge.

Wisdom in Context

We began the paper by suggesting that the privilege afforded to rationally and instrumentally circumscribed notions of knowledge and information means that contemporary organizational actors have lost touch with wisdom. Indeed, we would go so far as to suggest that western civilization has, in very large measure, rejected wisdom in favour of data, information and knowledge. That ‘wisdom’ is conspicuous by its absence in managerial and organizational discourses which dominate the workplace is symptomatic of a much wider malaise (Case and Gosling 2007; Rooney and McKenna 2007). Western philosophy, for example, gives very little heed or space to any conception of wisdom. As illustration of the eschewal of the term, we note that The Oxford Companion to Philosophy devotes only two relatively short paragraphs to its entry on ‘wisdom’ (Honderich 1995, 912). In confessional tone, its author, Prof. John Kekes, observes: ‘Although wisdom is what philosophy is meant to be a love of, little attention has been paid to this essential component of good lives in post-classical Western philosophy. It is perhaps for this reason that those in search of it often turn to the obscurities of oriental religions for enlightenment’ (Honderich 1995, 912). The implication of this rather sorry admission is at least twofold. Firstly, if we are to understand the wisdom tradition within Western civilization we shall need, more or less, to bypass ‘post-classical philosophy’ in favour of classical or pre-modern approaches to the topic. Secondly, as Kekes suggests, we may find enlightenment (with a small ‘e’) in oriental, that is, non-modern philosophies. As to the supposed ‘obscurities’ of such perspectives, we contend that they only remain obscure to those who refuse staunchly to investigate them systematically. By pursuing lines of enquiry that follow from this twofold implication we shall be able to advance an argument that re-establishes the role of wisdom within a Western tradition of ‘knowledge’, albeit a classical one. Furthermore, by approaching wisdom from both classical Western and oriental perspectives we shall be able to highlight its contextual nature and come to an understanding of PKM that addresses some of the concerns expressed by critics of KM.

The English word ‘context’ derives from the Latin verbs texere, meaning ‘to weave’, and contexere, denoting ‘to join together’, ‘to interweave’ or ‘weave together’ and ‘to compose’. This etymology thus evokes active images of interconnectedness, which is precisely the semantic investment that we would want to make when using the term context. When considering knowledge and practices in context, therefore, we are moved to think of inter-relationships between various actants (human and non-human) in a given domain at any given moment in time. We need to think in terms of the holism implied by Polanyi’s conceptions of participation
and *indwelling*, for example, both of which carry a sense of interweaving processes with respect to knowledge and action. There are also other exemplars of this emphasis on context. Within contemporary social science, Actor network theory (ANT) has sought to expose and explore interconnectedness, particularly when examining complex organizational processes, such as, computer design and applications, public policy decisions and so forth (Callon 1986; Latour 2005, Woolgar 1991). Yet considered from a philosophical standpoint, ANT has, in one important sense, simply rediscovered premodern and non-modern modes of explanation and understanding. Indeed, one of ANTs leading proponents, Bruno Latour, has admitted as much in his bold claim that ‘we have never been modern’ (Latour 1993).

Latour puts forward nothing less than a moral and political programme for rediscovering what he considers to be the excluded middle of modernity. A false dichotomy has been created by the moderns between ‘transcendent Nature’, on the one hand, and ‘immanent Society’ on the other, he suggests. Since the Enlightenment, the moderns pursued a programme of ontological ‘purification’ that denied acts of human mediation between the two respective provinces of Society and Nature and attempted to ensure that the ‘things’ of nature remained uncontaminated by the social constructions of apperceiving minds. It is therefore imperative, Latour maintains, to expose the networked nature of both ‘things’ and ‘social order’ and hence dissolve the false duality that modernity has imposed. Ontology is always already a matter of networked processes; of mediation, delegation, distribution, mandate and utterance. And yet, in the acts of purification necessary for the stabilization of modern objects and modern conceptualisations of ‘humanity’, ‘society’, ‘knowledge’ and so forth, the a priori fact of mediation has to be occluded or consigned to a kind of ‘modern unconsciousness’ (Latour 1993, 37). In effect, Latour and other ANT colleagues have alighted upon a form of philosophical holism which resonates strongly with premodern and non-modern cosmologies. ANT owes a debt to the unwillingness on the part of premoderns to differentiate ‘durably’ between Nature and Society and mirrors their persistent attempts to find and expose hybridised human/non-human connections within the universe.

**Knowledge and Wisdom in Aristotelian Philosophy**

We would want to go further than ANT, however, in trying not only to revitalize new forms of philosophical holism but also to reintroduce a vocabulary of *wisdom* with respect to human efficacy. ANT may well provide a most valuable analytical tool for considering organizational complexity but, as a programme, it seems scrupulously to have avoided a close consideration of ethics. In order to reinvent the language of wisdom for the contemporary organizational world, it is instructive to look - within the Western knowledge tradition - to classical schools of philosophy. Certain aspects of debate in the fields of leadership and management studies are already inclining toward an exploration of the premodern. Keith Grint, for example, has considered how the first three elements of Aristotle’s fourfold typology of intellectual virtue might be mobilized to improve our understanding of leadership practice (Grint 2007). He takes the divisions of *technē* (know how), *episteme* (intellectual knowledge) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and demonstrates how these offer mutually complimentary dimensions of assessing problems and dilemmas faced by leaders. While this is a commendable contribution in many respects, it nonetheless overlooks
certain important aspects of Aristotle’s philosophy. As Morrell (2007) has pointed out, for instance, Grint takes no account of the aesthetic dimension of Aristotle’s thinking but, more importantly from our point of view, the fourth and final element of the typology set out in the Nicomachean Ethics, namely, theoria (contemplation), gets no mention at all (Aristotle 1953).

Phronesis requires, according to Aristotle, the power of deliberation, beyond scientific deduction, because it must deal with situations and contingencies of which the causes are too diverse to arrest. Its chief function is to consider ‘what matters’, which can be accomplished only in collective deliberation amongst those who share a concern for a shared polity. Moving beyond the secular confines of the first three intellectual virtues, however, Aristotle posits theoria as the fourth, describing it as, ‘the only [intellectual virtue] that is praised on its own account, because nothing comes of it beyond the act of contemplation… yet such a life will be too high for human attainment. It will not be lived by us in our merely human capacity, but in virtue of something divine within us…’ (1953, 304-305, original emphasis). The fundamental significance of theoria in Aristotle’s schema is often ignored because it is taken to be too immaterial, unreasonable or literally theoretical to have much application in modern times (e.g. Grint 2007; Stamp et al. 2007). However, to do so is to miss the possibility that Aristotle’s premodern conceptualization of a continuity between the human and divine, with human reason at the hyparxis, might have contemporary relevance.

Aristotle’s four intellectual virtues help explicitly chart the territory between between self, role and organization (or polis). It is traditional to describe the intellectual virtues as if from the bottom up, an ascending scale from technē (embodied skill) to episteme (cognitive abstract knowledge), thence to phronesis (practical intelligence, wise judgement or circumspection) and on to theoria (contemplative participation with divine reality). However, we shall approach things from the opposite direction. The Nichomachean Ethics in which these intellectual virtues are laid out most explicitly is a collection of lecture notes laying out the basis for ethical conduct. Although not made explicit, Aristotle’s assumption about the nature of the world are clearly important, because these assumptions – his theory of being, knowledge and intellect – underpin all that he says is virtuous, and his concept of a good life. So while The Nichomachean Ethics, and most modern commentators, give an account of the ascent of human virtue from technē through episteme to phronesis, we will get a better sense of where all this coming from, as it were, by commencing with theoria, the participatory contemplation of ‘wholenesses’, from whence intellectual energy (nous or knowingness) descends in to the discursive meditations and deliberations required of phronesis. The concepts that coagulate, as it were, from these intuitive meditations, are the stuff of epistemic knowledge, while technē is their manifestation in skills and habits of the body (and in related tools and technologies).

This downward or involutionary arc of ideas is thus logically prior to the evolutionary arc of intellectual virtues. Although the ascent of the virtues charts the growth of each individual, it is a growth into something – into our inheritance of ideas. Each stage of the developmental ascent mirrors and represents a stage in the prior descent of ideas into more concrete, objective and personalised knowledge (see figure 2). So by approaching the intellectual virtues as just that – powers of the
intellect exercised in the manipulation of different phases of knowledge, we discern the nature of the knowledge (and ideas) at each stage. As we show below, this notion of ideas available to be known is precisely what we imply in the concept of knowledge that is indigent to a role, realised by a person-in-role through the act of managing him- or herself in that role. The role itself ‘calls forth’, as it were, a priori role-specific knowledge in the role holder, uniting perceptions indigent of the role with the capacity for apperception in the person.

In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle eschews detailed comment on *theoria*, on the grounds that it deals with knowledge that will be lived by us ‘in virtue of something divine within us’ (Aristotle 1953, 305). This is knowledge awaiting a knower, intelligible wholeness in which human intellect participates, to which extent knower and known are inseparable, and so ‘more divine than human’. Divine knowledge is necessarily eternal and un-indigent of anything logically posterior to it; it must therefore be the context within which personal knowledge exists, and in a Platonic sense, the ‘stuff’ of which personal knowledge is made. Relating to our earlier comments about context, ideas are the ‘text’ of which knowledge is woven. (In this sense – if not in others – Aristotle concurs with Plato’s model of the intellectual universe of Ideas; it is in the subsequent working out of the implications that he differs, as well as in the motivating role of the idea of the Good).

*Phronesis* is the ability to make judgements about ‘what matters’; not something that can be decided once and for all, because what matters at any given time, for any given group of people or collective venture, depends on the circumstances and how these circumstances are perceived and understood. *Phronesis* is therefore realised collectively and requires people able to perceive and consider social, political and cultural aspects of knowledge referred to above. This requires a degree of maturity, insight and common interest. The latter is crucial, because the consideration of what matters is always situated in a particular community: it is what matters to us. In fact Aristotle asserts that *phronesis* can be properly exercised only amongst friends, who have each others’ best interests at heart; this is so important that he dedicates 2 of the 10 sections of *The Nichomachean Ethics* to friendship. French et al. (forthcoming) argue that in classical times friendship was thus defined as a social, even a political quality; the personalisation of friendship responds to the modern emergence of the person. The same might be said of *phronesis*, which in many modern accounts is described as an individual attribute or attainment, almost an ornament of the wise (Grint 2007); but in our account, *phronesis* might better be translated as *circumspection*, following Heidegger’s 1924 translation of *phronesis* as *umsicht*. As the etymology reveals *phronesis* as *circumspection* implies the apperception of wholeness, deriving as it does from a composite of the Latin *specere*, ‘to see’ and *circum*, ‘around’ or ‘complete’. Circumspection (*phronesis*) is thus collective deliberation about a political system as a whole; philosophically, it is the search to contain the multiplicity of factors in a universal idea (Aristotle, 1953, 1141b-1142a); the concept of universals – i.e. the idea of this intellectual project, considering all things in one idea - derives from the participative contemplation of wholes, as practised in *theoria*. 
Of course any community or polis is imbued with its values, even if no one is deliberating about them. The knowledge is potentially there, to be actualised by those able to take up the role of phronimoi. In such circumstance collective values might be somewhat attenuated, locked into customs and un-articulated assumptions. Contemplation would be of little use in making these explicit; such is rather the role of critical reflection, a rigorous observation and interpretation of the life of the polis. This would be impossible without the ability to analyse, assess and manipulate cognitive abstractions. Yet such intellectual abstractions are mediated by language, comprising what Blackler (1995) calls ‘encoded knowledge’. As an intellectual virtue episteme requires mental training and also a common codification of knowledge, categories and language games. While phronesis requires friendly deliberation amongst wise members of the polis, episteme requires a common system of language and meaning. As an intellectual virtue it is not identical with such a semantic system, but cannot be realised without it (in the same way as phronesis is not identical with a political process, but cannot be realised without it (Aristotle 1953, 1141b). Taking up a role of ‘thinker’ within a linguistic culture is to inherit the wealth of its meanings, to think the thoughts that are available, as if in search of a thinker (Bion 1984 [1967]); and also to contribute new meanings and possibilities to the culture, in so far as one engages with others. An organised body of concepts and theories about any polis is an ideology, and is the intellectual basis for action.

By technē Aristotle refers to all manner of skilful know-how, in which category we must include actions that follow from circumspect deliberation and conceptual analysis. Ideologies thus find expression in political activity and other social engagements. At the most complex level, includes technē organisational and political know-how, constructing and sustaining the conditions for phronesis. At more simple levels, technical skill is the embodiment of social and material relations of production. Of course from the perspective of the individual, it appears that skills are learnt first at the most personal and simple level, developing along with more complex intellectual abilities as one grows towards the capacity for phronesis, circumspect deliberation on what matters to the community. However, as we have sought to demonstrate, this focus on the individual obscures the context of ideas and knowledge that always precedes the individual, and is the material from which he or she weaves a place in the world.

Aristotle’s exposition of intellectual virtue, we contend, offers a much richer account of knowledge than that provided by contemporary theories of KM. It not only expands and contextualizes our understanding of the personal in relation to knowledge and wisdom but also enables us to show how germane classical philosophy is to dilemmas and issues faced in today’s organizations. Before concluding the paper, however, we would like to consider how wisdom might be pursued in practice within everyday human settings, including those encountered in the workplace. This will enable us to reexamine, re-contextualize and, perhaps, revitalize the concept of ‘management’ in relation to personal knowledge.

Stoicism and the ‘Management’ of Personal Knowledge

Do not try to make things happen the way you want, but want what happens to happen the way it happens and you will be happy’ (Epictetus, cited in Hadot 2004a, 133).
One of the most pragmatic approaches to developing wisdom within the Western tradition arguably comes from classical Stoicism. The Stoic school was founded by Zeno toward the end of the fourth century B.C., was given further impetus under the influence of Chrysippus in the third century and, following a sectarian split, continued to flourish during the Roman period until the second century A.D. (Hadot 2004a, 126-39). Important protagonists and practitioners of Stoicism during the Roman era were Seneca, Musonius, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius (Hadot 2004b) and, as little remains of the founding texts of Zeno and Chrysippus, it is in these Greco-Roman writings that the principles of Stoical philosophy have been preserved. In this philosophy one discovers a practical and gentle approach to the art of living which, we suggest, has much to offer contemporary role holders in organizations. As with our discussion of Aristotle, the focus of this section will again be on virtue.

As Hadot (1995, 2004a, 2004b) is at pains to emphasize, it is crucial to understand the difference between Stoical conceptions of philosophical discourse and philosophy as a way of life in order to understand this tradition. To the extent that love of wisdom has to be taught by those that live philosophically to those who aspire to do so, the Stoics developed abstract theories of knowledge with respect to the three core virtues of physics, logic and ethics. The true purpose of such discourse, however, was to enable aspirants to enter into a philosophical life within which all the virtues combined to produce a way of being in the world. That way of being, moreover, was governed by an overarching principle that required philosophers to pursue the good, which, in turn, entailed directing their actions toward the benefit of others. The pursuit of the good and avoidance of evil instantiated in Stoical ethics followed inexorably and necessarily from the need to act in accordance with universal Reason. Stoics strove to live in harmony with Nature; a concept that represented the myriad complex processes of the cosmos including, of course, human consciousness, thought and action. Stoicism was predicated on an axiomatic truth of the cosmic interconnection between human and non-human realms such that the world was understood to be ‘one single living being which [was] likewise in tune with itself and self-coherent’ (Hadot 2004a, 128-9). The spiritual practices which were central to living the Stoical life were all directed toward helping individuals realize this truth by way of abandoning the conceit of ‘individuality’ and, through a form of personal surrender, bringing intentions, thoughts and actions into line with Nature.

Thus, for the Stoics, wisdom is to be realized by refraining from thinking, speaking or acting in ways that contradict Reality. As the opening words to this section by Epictetus convey, the route to happiness lies in not wanting things to be different than they actually are. The philosophical discourse and spiritual exercises of Stoicism are all directed at bringing about a transformation in consciousness that will lead to such wisdom. As noted in earlier work (Case and Gosling 2007), Stoical methods parallel the elements of the famous Christian prayer attributed to the philosopher of religion, Reinhold Niebuhr ¹, ‘God, grant me the serenity to accept the

¹ Niebuhr (1892-1971) held a chair in ethics and the philosophy of religion at Union Theological Seminary, New York City from 1928 to 1960 but is best remembered for his popular prayer. Niebuhr’s claim to have composed the prayer has not gone uncontested. There is some evidence to suggest that the prayer is apocryphal and may even have originated in Indian or Greek antiquity. There is a chance, therefore, that the prayer’s Stoical qualities result directly from Stoical influence; in which case, the comparison we make here reduces to pure tautology. For a discussion of the prayer’s origins, see <http://www.aahistory.com/prayer.html> (accessed 30th October 2008).
things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference’, each stanza of which can be related, respectively, to Stoical notions of physics, ethics and logic. With respect to physics, for example, it is necessary to understand the sphere of one’s own action and influence. There are many aspects of Nature over which mere human will has no power whatsoever. In the last analysis, we have no control over the metabolism of the bodies we conventionally consider to be ‘our own’. No individual can anticipate or control the precise circumstances of their own death (even, ultimately, that of the suicide), or will not to suffer from illness, loss of loved ones and so forth. Similarly, we neither have ultimate control of the thoughts, decisions and actions of others nor over the more macro supporting conditions of our lives, such as, the parents we are born to and the society that we grow up in and so forth. Everything from the weather to current geopolitics are totally out of our hands and, from a Stoical viewpoint, we are like so much flotsam and jetsam in the great ocean of life. For the Stoic, such exogenous conditions result from the workings of Fate. The wise way to respond to any causally conditioned circumstances over which we have no control, moreover, is to accept them with equanimity. The idea of volitional response implicit in this attitude brings us to the second Stoic virtue, namely, ethics.

Within Stoic philosophical discourse, the fact that Nature is in large measure determined by an unfathomably complex set of causal conditions does not mean that there is no possibility for free will and moral action. On the contrary, the cultivation of good intention and good action is central to Stoic philosophy as a way of life. Accordingly, the Stoics - Epictetus in particular - developed a detailed and elaborate theory of duty. Fate may well dictate the circumstances of our lives but, unlike the Skeptics who resigned themselves to worldly indifference, or the Epicureans who chose to withdraw from the world of suffering in order to find happiness, Stoics sought wisdom through engagement with the polis. Stoicism does not provide an excuse for ‘indifference’, in a pejorative sense, and a commensurate backing down from responsibility to oneself and others. The Stoic is quite likely to lead a family life, have children, work, pursue a career and engage fully in the political life of the city. But all this needs to be done ethically, that is, with a mind to the welfare of others; both those near to one and those within the wider community. Such attitudes and obligations are dictated by Nature and universal Reason themselves which have, in effect, endowed humans with moral choice and determined that it is good to care for oneself and others.

This brings us to a consideration of logic, the third and final Stoic virtue. As with physics and ethics, there is a philosophical discourse which supports the spiritual exercises of logic in the form of training in uses of dialectic and syllogism, but it is the practice of logic that distinguishes Stoicism from other Hellenic schools of philosophy. Logic as spiritual exercise entails paying close attention (prosokē) to physical sense perception and mental representations in order to become skilful in judgement of, or assent to, the Real. Our senses and mental representations are real enough in themselves and are, in large measure, conditioned by physics or Fate. Responses to those perceptions, however, involve choices which involve skilful or unskilful judgements. Logic entails the development of awareness and reasoned response to the world which pre-empts or ‘defuses’ actions based on passionate
responses. To use an example given by Epictetus by way of illustration, if one is on a boat in stormy weather and hears a terrifying clap of thunder, logic can be invoked to maintain equanimity in the face of apparent adversity. Attention to experience informs one that the perception of the clap of thunder is real, so, too, the experience of terror. Thus far, one’s training in awareness alerts one to a set of physical and mental preconditions. In the absence of attention, one might fall unconsciously into a conditioned habit pattern – say, a tendency to panic - and act unwisely; to ponder one’s imminent demise, for example, or to worry about all the possible unpleasant consequences of being at the mercy of the storm. To fall un-reflectively into such a passionate response would be unwise (‘evil’) from a Stoical perspective. Training in the spiritual exercise of logic and attention, enables one to accept the reality of the frightening situation without falling into redundant fantasy and worry. One simply does not give ‘assent’ to the fantasies. Instead, equanimity is maintained in the face of such circumstances permitting one to respond with reason and efficacy rather than blind panic.

Stoical spiritual exercises of the sort set out in detail by Marcus Aurelius in his Meditations (2003 [167 A.D.]) throw a completely different complexion on the notion of personal knowledge management. ‘Management’ of knowledge is clearly possible within the Stoic philosophy but in a sense that differs considerably from the KM of contemporary organization theory and practice. What is at stake here is a far more subjective and contextual ‘management’ through the careful development of personal awareness, skilful judgement in relation to mental representations and restraint of unwise action.

Conclusion

Our conclusions are in two parts: firstly, we draw together the theoretical understandings of PKM developed in this paper; secondly, we consider implications of our argument for those taking up leadership and management roles in organisational and political systems, and for leadership and management development in general.

An appreciation of premodern ways of knowing and being are, we maintain, highly pertinent to the post-modern context. These philosophies and their associated practices, if taken seriously, can also help inform a radical conceptualization of personal knowledge management. We have argued in this paper that in an age that has lost its wisdom in knowledge, and its knowledge in information, it may be timely to reconsider the role that virtue can play in the quest for PKM. There are many contemporary leadership and management contexts where wise action, as opposed to rational utilitarian judgement, would be extremely valuable. If understood and enacted, for example, the virtues of Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy could help individuals and groups mediate between cognitive knowledge and practice in ways that, arguably, have been lost to the present generation. We might even go so far as to define the Stoic ‘spiritual exercises’ (askesis) as providing the practical route to ‘personal knowledge’. There is also a ‘managerial’ dimension to askesis if we casuistically stretch its meaning a little. The self-managing aspects of Stoic exercises that accompany the development of the skills of attention, selective assent to mental representations, discernment of truthfulness and ‘care of the self’ more broadly, for
example, constitute a form of personal knowledge management. Yet, in such a definition, we need carefully to reappraise and amend our contemporary understanding of the three terms: ‘personal’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘management’.

We have argued that PKM involves disciplining intra-psychic processes, disciplinary practices that might take Stoic spiritual exercises as their source of inspiration. Furthermore, PKM also involves perceiving, internalising and working with knowledge that becomes available through taking up a role, including conscious and unconscious aspects of knowledge. This we have characterised as a boundary-management task, encompassing the boundaries between self and role, between the specific role and other roles, and system-level boundaries. In particular, we have drawn attention to the processes by which certain kinds of knowledge are brought into being by the confluence of person and role, which we characterise as a knowledge-nexus. Epistemologically, we claim that roles are so closely associated with some forms of knowledge that they might, indeed, be defined by the knowledge to which they give access; and further, that it makes sense to think of this knowledge as a potential awaiting actualization by a person taking up and managing themselves in that role. We thus propose a theory of knowledge that refers to ideas as wholes, rendered particular and ‘known’ by role-holders exercising the intellectual virtues as described by Aristotle. We are aware of the Platonic roots of this epistemological position, and propose further research on the implications for constructionist and critical realist accounts of PKM.

We believe the implications of our account are both relevant and challenging for people in leadership and management roles. The Stoic spiritual exercises as described by Epictetus and practised by Marcus Aurelius provide a profound and valuable guide for managing oneself in role. Our account of phronesis emphasises both its collective realisation and its rootedness in contemplative intuition of wholes (rather than the simple accretion and manipulation of epistemic concepts: a distinction between cleverness and wisdom, perhaps). This promises new insight into the function of reflectiveness in leadership and management development. All too often, reflection is described as learning from past events and sometimes as reflexive awareness of the here and now. Theoria, however, is qualitatively different, arising from participation in intellectual wholenesses, described as ‘divine’, and thus transcending purposive agency of human effort. Here we enter the domain of spiritual practices, beyond reflective practices, though quite possibly enabled or enhanced by reflectiveness. We suggest that this goes some way to explaining the continuing (and perhaps increasing) commitment to religious adherence in otherwise secular working environments – because religions may offer the opportunity to contemplate symbolic representations of ideal wholenesses, an intellectual contribution that is vital to the practice phronesis. This contemplative union is quite distinct from the personal disciplinary benefits of reflection or the Stoic virtues, though it may be partially a fruit thereof. We suggest that further research into contemplative engagement, in religious or philosophical terms, would offer valuable insights into the basis for ethical leadership and organizational process.

References


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FIGURES

Figure 1: Person in Role (within an open system conceived as a process of converting diverse inputs to outputs).

Figure 2: Involutionary Arc of Potential Knowledge and Evolutionary Arc of Actual or Realised Knowledge.