

The Philosophy of Management Science (The Case of a Neglected Special Science)

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Abstract

The Philosophy of Management Science has been sadly neglected by most contemporary literature in the Philosophy of science. This paper argues that this neglect has been unfortunate and that there is much to be learned from paying greater philosophical attention to the set of issues discussed or analysed by the philosophy of management science. The major contribution of this field to such current topics as reductionism, explanation and methodology within the scientific enterprise is viewed as a possible insight into the broader understanding of the philosophy of science

INTRODUCTION

A review of contemporary literature in Philosophy of science reveals an interesting fact. While there are separate sub-disciplines for the philosophy of Biological sciences, the philosophy of the Natural Sciences and the philosophy of the social sciences, there is one fundamental science that is missing. Why has there been no philosophy of management sciences.

What is management? Despite the various attempts that may hinge on the conceptual analysis of the word management, we can say that management is the “organization and co-ordination of the activities of an enterprise in accordance with certain policies and in achievement of defined objectives”⁽¹⁾. This definition is narrowed to activities of an enterprise, but management transcends this dimension even up to the larger society. Management comprises Planning, organizing, Staffing, leading, or directing and controlling an organization (a group of one or more people or entities) or effort for purposes of accomplishing a goal. Effective planning programme involves human resources planning desiring qualifications for positions identifying carrier paths and developing replacement charts.²

The philosophy of management science considers problems raised by the management sciences, problems such as analysis of managerial policies, theories, explanation and interpretation of principles within the management sciences. If one wishes to argue the point of whether there does already exist a small sub – discipline of the philosophy of science called “The Philosophy of management science even its practitioners must admit that it is still in its infancy. And perhaps most obvious, the philosophical literature on any aspect of management is extremely sparse, especially where we put into consideration that the dominant discipline within philosophy of science are Philosophy of social science and philosophy of the natural science which includes both philosophy of the physical sciences and philosophy of the biological sciences.

The culmination of this is that the set of issues one would naturally associate with a philosophy of management has at least been unconsciously ignored. In fact, we may ask why is it that philosophers do not find it interesting to discuss issues bordering on management. Or is likely, the prejudice that give the management sciences unique relationship with the social sciences, every interesting philosophical issue that right arise as a result of studying management is merely a repetition of some interesting ongoing area of concern within the philosophy of the social sciences.

REDUCTIONISM

Reductionism⁽³⁾ might be the pivot on which the neglect of philosophy of management science hinges. In science reductionism can have several deferent senses. Essentially, it refers to the limits of the process of breaking up phenomena or processes into smaller and smaller parts and assuming that the whole can be comprehended in this way. A degree of reduction is necessary to science else it would be impossible to determine important versus non important measurements, differences between apparatus and of experiments etc. it will be impossible to rely on management science if we refuse to rely on the research methods of the social sciences or more to say methods of the science. Just as it would be impossible to rely on mathematics if one refuses to reduce phenomena to numbers.

Reductionism in philosophy is the theory that asserts that the nature of complex things can always be reduced to simpler or more fundamental things. This can be said of objects, phenomena, explanations, theories and meanings. Reductionism is often understood to imply the unity of science. For example, chemistry is based on physics, fundamental biology is based on chemistry and psychology and sociology are both based on biology. The reductionists believe that the behavioral sciences should become a “genuine” scientific discipline by being

based on genetic biology, and on the systematic study of culture⁽⁴⁾.

One type of reductionism believes that all fields of study are ultimately reduced to scientific explanation. An historical event can be explained from the perspective of sociology or psychology and in turn reduced to physiology and ultimately to chemistry and physics. This might imply that the historical event was “nothing but” the physical event. It appears to be widely conceived that management can be perfectly reduced to social science because the methods of investigation to arrive at truth within these disciplines do not defer. The methods of the scientific enterprise follows specific procedures and is summed by the belief expressed by Chava Frankfort –Nachinias in their *Research methods in the social sciences* that “Nature is orderly and such there is a recognizable regularity in nature”: Nature can be known and can be explained; that there exists a human relationship with nature; natural phenomena have natural causes antecedent to them and these can be understood and explained without the thought of our recourse to supernatural explanations; nothing is self evident and as such knowledge and truth claims must be proved and or demonstrated objectively; and finally knowledge can be acquired through experience, meaning therefore that if science can aid our understanding and explanation of the world and of reality, it has to be empirical⁽⁵⁾.

There appears to be no difference between the empirical investigation of the social and management science, thus the issue of reductionism may hold sway and account for the possible neglect of the philosophy of management sciences. However, the philosophy of management science is a special science just as philosophy of biological and physical sciences whose enterprise mirrors specifics within that discipline. If the philosophy of management science would be reduced to social sciences due to similarity in methodology, then there would really be no need sub-dividing biological and physical sciences since both utilize the same scientific method in their search for objectivity.

EXPLANATION

A very good area of interest in the philosophy of management science that is closely related to the issue of reductionism is the investigation into the concept of explanation. What does explanation in contemporary management science consists in? Are they autonomous from the concern of the social sciences? An analysis of the concept of explanation is very important in science because it is among the crucial purpose of science; the other is the prediction of events. The central theme of this area is to ask what an explanation is and what makes it scientific. How can we see its relationship in explaining issues as reduction in philosophy of management science and that of social sciences?

Explanation is giving a clear exposition of an object of study. When we explain we put forward assertion that makes us comprehend or satisfy our curiosity. Empirical science, in all its major branches, seeks not only to describe the phenomena in the world of our experience but also explain or understand their occurrence; it is concerned not just with “what?” when? And “where? But definitely, and often predominantly with the why of the phenomena it investigates”⁽⁶⁾ Human experience is basically the concern of scientific explanation. Human resources, social and economic experiences area all object of scientific explanation. What makes it scientific explanation? The procedures through which we arrive at truth are what make it scientific or non-scientific. When we talk of empirical science our emphasis is predicated on what we can see, touch, feel and observe with our five senses as against metaphysical realities. The philosophy of science has its central theme to investigate “the character of scientific knowledge and claims about scientific knowledge”⁽⁷⁾ All subdivisions namely, philosophy of social sciences, philosophy of natural science and the neglected philosophy of management sciences have their themes revolving around this objective.

What an explanation does is to provide understanding. Something happens which puzzles us, and in seeking an explanation we are seeking to understand it. One very important from of explanation which pervades all areas of management science and which speaks in favour of epistemological reductionism of management science to social science is the reflection on management policies planning, organizing etc.

Critics of the scientific status of management sciences are worried about the objectivity of the management scientific endeavour. The main issue is that management phenomena are too complex and in some cases too subjective for any study of the “social” or “management” to be objective (scientific). The critics argue that attempts at the scientific study of social or management phenomena are reductions and distortions of human behavior and the custom of man. It is on this ground of human psychology that David Hume opposed the scientific procedures predicated on inductive science. Hume’s conclusion was that although there is no way of validating inductive procedure, our psychological constitution makes us think in terms of them. As he puts it in *The Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* “custom, then, is the great guide of human life (of human nature). It is that principle alone whole renders our experience useful to us and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past. Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to the memory and senses. We should never know how to adjust means to ends, or to employ our nature powers in the production of any effect. There would be an end at once of all action, as well as of the chief part of speculation.”⁽⁸⁾ By this, we are saying

our neglect of the philosophy of management science may be due to our psychological constitution of relying on our customary disciplines which we appear to have our orientation. This unfortunate misconception of the objectivity of the philosophy of management science has robbed this area of study needed attention. Explanation within the context of this discipline aims at control and clarification of vague concepts. For example in management science, a concept such as “development” will have as varied a meaning as there are social scientists defining it. The attempt to specify its meaning sparks off a barrage of rhetoric which in the end may render the concept scientifically unclear.

Philosophy of management sciences focus directly on clarification of issues bordering on management and administration in organizations. By this, it enhances understanding. Akan Ryan position on explanation is that “what an explanation must do is to provide understanding, something happens which puzzles us and in seeking an explanation we are seeking to understand it”⁽⁹⁾ An adequate explanation is one in which the explanations provide necessary and sufficient condition for the explanandum.

Perhaps the greatest source of interest which the philosopher of science may have in the philosophy of management science is simply to learn that from a certain point of view management too can be considered a special science. And attendant upon this is the realization that what previously may have been considered a relatively uncontroversial case of ontological dependence raises the very same issue regarding reducibility, the autonomy of explanation at secondary levels that have long been a traditional debate within the philosophy of science.

METHODOLOGY, THEORY AND PRACTICE

There may be some criticism directed on the methodology which the management sciences adopt to legitimize their claims to scientific status. The management science is bogged by concepts that are yet too imprecise to be useful in scientific analysis. In the other sciences, most concepts have acquired universal common applicability. In physics, for instance, the concept “Motion” as defined by physics is unlike to evoke conceptual controversy among them. It is somewhat curious truism that despite the fact that management touches nearly every aspect of our lives, few thinkers have shown an interest in it from a rule or philosophical perspective until relatively recently. Indeed, few philosophers can be said to have paid much attention to the management enterprise itself. Philosophers were primarily interested in management from an economic or political standpoint and not as a primary object of attention. As a general rule, management practitioners and theorists tend to accept the principles that are current in their society¹⁰. Modern management practices and theory developed in the age of scientific discovery and this gave it a mechanistic orientation. In particular, Newton had just discovered classical physics. This would influence management and economics in ways that we are just beginning to understand. Early writers dealing with economic topics such as Adam Smith, borrowed many of their techniques and terminology from classical physics. They would use terms like “equilibrium” “Labour force” “elasticity” and “income accelerator”. Today a few theorists are starting to question the mechanistic approach and model management on biological principles. Newton’s Law of inertia can be found in marketing or commerce where it is posited that consumers will continue in their current state unless they are encouraged to act otherwise. The philosophy of management science is to consider the problems raised and analysis of theories, policies and their interpretation as it affects all sectors of the society or the management science as a whole.

In this essay, we have offered arguments in support of greater attention to the philosophy of management science which has been neglected within the philosophy of science. It has of late become a truism within the philosophy of science that a priori solution to philosophical matters concerning the management sciences are stale without attention to details drawn from analysis of concepts, theories and policies in the management of organizations and societies.

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