

Foreword

What does managing knowledge mean? What do we talk about when we talk about knowledge? What are the implications, for research or practice, of adopting different perspectives on these fundamental questions?

Sometimes it seems that, maybe because we are sidetracked by the overwhelming advancements in IT systems or by the increasing diffusion of Knowledge Management (KM) practices in companies, we forget that these issues still lack a generally accepted view. Indeed, there are also those that think that KM will never be a real scientific discipline but only a set of practices in companies and organizations. In short, asking fundamental questions may appear as an exercise for philosophers, or a mere waste of time. My personal opinion is that this is not the case, and for that reason, the book written by Constantin Bratianu has the merit to turn our attention again to these long-lasting issues of the development of knowledge dynamics and of KM. Any further progress that we will be able to do in this field—not only in conceptual terms but also in the practice—requires an effort to face fundamental questions. Especially, it implies attempts to call things with their proper names. So, what do we talk about when we talk about knowledge?

Even if we just restrict our scope purely to the practical aspects of managing knowledge, it would be impossible for us to share our experience in KM, to learn from others or from our past, and even to design and implement advanced tools for storing or processing knowledge: we still need to reflect on the concepts we use, and the names we adopt. All human activities need to be “expressed” in appropriate forms, and KM is not an exception. The accuracy of tags we attach to things, phenomena, or entities gives the measure of our level of understanding of them. As was acutely stated by the philosopher Wittgenstein “The *limits* of *my* language mean the *limits* of *my* world.” Here, the analysis made by Constantin Bratianu becomes insightful and accurate, and covers the wide range of approaches that have been adopted in KM research and practice.

Especially, since the idea itself of *knowledge* has intrinsic ambiguity and unexpressiveness, this has often led us to use metaphors instead of formal language. The purpose of metaphors is to arouse associations with sensorial experience or, at least, with established representations of reality. This may allow us to visualize our ideas of knowledge and share them with others, in the hope that we can be understood, at least in part, when we talk about knowledge. This aspect of *communication* is not marginal in the development of science (let’s just think of Galileo Galilei’s efforts to “make vulgar” its subtle reasoning – *vulgar* or in other words like they can be understood even by the common people, the *vulgus*): in short, our ideas can be good enough only if they can be expressed properly, even to ourselves.

At the same time, reasoning by using metaphors helps to experiment new languages and to extend our brain frame for embracing new meanings and new implications. The fresh re-interpretation that Constantin Bratianu proposes of the great thinkers (starting from ancient philosophers and ending with recent researchers in KM) effectively illustrates this continuous effort of metaphorical representation of the notion of knowledge, seen as a way to improve our capability to see it as it is – or at least as it can be. The consequences of this way of proceeding “by means of metaphors” in KM are significant even in practical terms. For example, as Constantin Bratianu properly recalls, many KM solutions—and especially the technical tools—are the application of a “knowledge as an object” metaphor, with all the advantages and disadvantages that this brings about. Similarly, adopting a perspective of knowledge as a “process” rather than a “fluid” or a “flow” implies a view of how individuals can learn, create or share knowledge, and by this way can contribute to the business of their organizations. The book offers a thorough comparative analysis of all these cases, which provides food for thought to both researchers and practitioners.

A second important point in which a reader may find great substance in the book is the fact that knowledge can't be only associated to a rational dimension. Objective knowing, based on a positivistic and rational approach of progressive accumulation of factual elements and their relationships, is clearly essential for human activities, but is not the only one. Here, I would like to emphasize three main ideas suggested by Constantin Bratianu. First, by adopting a metaphor drawn from Physics, knowledge can be interpreted as *field* like energy. Second, there are three main fields of knowledge: cognitive (rational), emotional, and spiritual. Third, one form of knowledge can be transformed into another in the same way in which mechanical energy is transformed into thermal energy in Physics. That means to depart from a static interpretation of knowledge and to adopt a dynamic view.

The efficacy itself of our decision making or cognitive processes depend on the dynamic relationship that occurs, in our mind and body, between rational, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Our motivations, feelings, even fears can limit or, conversely, enhance our cognitive capability, and can make us “see things” in different or unusual ways. During a break in a conference, when I was discussing with Constantin Bratianu this point, he provided a good example of how different dimensions come into play for human beings: Napoleon asked his soldiers to shout “Vive la France” instead of “Vive le Roi” before a battle; this could give to the rational side of their mind a credible reason to act, take decisions, and in the end, even to die for their country – namely, for their land and families and not merely for “le Roi.” In modern organizations, even though the rational models of management science still have a central role, the other cognitive dimensions of individuals can't be neglected, and can't be simply treated as “noise” or “statistical disturbance.” They can influence cognitive processes and visions of reality and, consequently, affect business decisions: indeed, these are never disjointed from the values, feelings, or intimate purposes of decision makers.

This book stimulates us with a new and fresh perspective on these knowledge dynamics and how they affect organizational behavior, beyond the well-known SECI model developed by Ikujiro Nonaka and his colleagues. The basic KM processes such as knowledge creation, knowledge acquisition, knowledge loss, or knowledge sharing are presented in a new, clear, and comprehensive way that considers the complexity of knowledge dynamics.

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Human beings are complex creatures, and so are the organizations – which are, for the most part, made of human beings. This excellent piece of work not only collects evidence of that and proposes a new way to face this complexity: also, it places individuals at the centre of analysis and reminds us the real sense of the challenge we have to face when we want to talk about knowledge and KM.

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