Better Living through Philosophy: Ways of Knowing and the Search for Common Ground

Turning of the Wheel: A Humanities Exploration & the Malcolm Renfrew Interdisciplinary Colloquium

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Outline

Elements of the Talk

The Problem – Intercultural Misunderstanding

The Goal – Better Living in the Context of Diversity

The Method – Philosophical Reflection (no, really...)

Conceptual Background
  – Ways of Knowing
  – Common Ground
  – Integration

Steps toward a Solution? – The Toolbox Project
  – The Context & Our Problem
  – The Challenge of Communicating across Disciplines
  – A Philosophical Response

A Metaphorical Conclusion
Elements of the Talk

Rodney’s Keynote Address

The Power of Story

The Unique in the Universal

“Turning of the Wheel” Metaphor

Ways of Knowing

Unity in Diversity

Philosophy

The Good Life

Synthesis

Common Ground

The Toolbox Project

Bridge Metaphor
Cultural Interaction ...

• Think of a *culture* as a socially distributed set of beliefs, values, and experiences

• Cultures support different views of the world
The Problem
The Problem
The Problem

... Can Lead to ...

- These worldviews frame how one experiences, interacts, knows

- **Example**: “head knowledge” and “heart knowledge”
The Problem

... Intercultural Misunderstanding

• Cultures invariably interact, and their different worldviews can produce a problematic diversity
  – Diversity as cacophony
  – Diversity as divisiveness

• Life can be harder when some sort of unity is not achieved amidst the diversity
The Goal

Improve Life by Finding Unity in the Diversity

• Seek not only the unique in the universal, but the universal in the unique

• This requires identifying common ground on which to stand to bridge the differences

• Unity is not *unison*, but a type of *harmony*
Philosophical Reflection

- Why think philosophy can help? Why think of it as relevant to better living?

- What is philosophy?

  - Gk., *philosophia* – “love of wisdom”
  - Reason, Theory
  - Action, Practice
  - Pursuit of the good life -- *eudaimonia*
  - Synthesis

Philosophy
Philosophical Reflection

• Philosophy as reframing, reconceiving, resetting

• Focus on philosophy as an effort to:

  *identify the unity*  
  *in the diversity*  
  *through abstraction*
Ways of Knowing

• **Relation to worldview:** different ways of engaging the world, of becoming connected, of living in it
  – Different from ways of believing
  – There is a diversity of ways of knowing
  – *Examples:* head knowledge, heart knowledge

• **Consider head knowledge:**
  – Central concepts: evidence, justification, argument
  – Born in *research*
Common Ground

- Consider the metaphor: ground in common on which we stand together
  - Feet set, a mutual stake in the outcome
  - Enables participants to see the differences and similarities
  - *Not* uniformity or singlemindedness
Common Ground

- **Consider head knowledge:**
  - Often cashed out in terms of shared information
  - Used in semantics and psychology of communication
  - Used in interdisciplinary theory as an epistemic (i.e., knowledge-related) condition on disciplinary synthesis
Synthesis

• Seek the unity in diversity, the similarity in difference

• Aim for *harmony*, not conformity

• Philosophy as abstraction from difference to common ground, without washing out the differences
  – Respect and preserve difference
  – Conceptual harmony
Steps toward a Solution?

Getting a Few Heads Together…

• Focus on *head knowledge* – on *research*
  – Specifically on *translational research* – research that moves knowledge out into the world (e.g., health, climate science)
  – This is an *intercultural* context, home to misunderstanding and miscommunication

• The **Idea**: Use philosophy to enable partners in these research efforts to bridge their cultural gaps, thereby finding some unity in their diversity -- the Toolbox Project
Cultural Divides and Philosophical Bridges

• **Finding Unity in the Diversity:**
  – *Ways of Knowing* – partners see different worlds, value different outcomes, speak different languages
  – *Common Ground* – problems and projects, but this can leave differences unseen
  – *Synthesis* – use philosophical abstraction to enable partners to transcend differences and see the world through each other’s eyes

• **The Principal Problem:** Cross-disciplinary and interprofessional communication
Communication as Fundamental to Success

• Translational collaboration confronts many challenges
• The ability to communicate effectively between collaborators and across disciplines is critical to meeting these challenges
  – Selling the science
  – Establishing and managing individual and collective identities
  – Maintaining reputation (e.g., “facework”)
  – Avoiding unreasonable disagreement and agreement
  – Negotiating research compromises

• “At the heart of interdisciplinary is communication—the conversations, connections, and combinations that bring new insights to virtually every kind of scientist and engineer.” (Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research (2004). Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, p. 19)
Better Research through Philosophy

• The Toolbox Project focuses on understanding and improving communication about research content within collaborations

• **Leading Idea:**

  
  Enhanced understanding → Enhanced communication

• A structured dialogue can reveal different fundamental assumptions that can hamper translational research

• The dialogue is more productive if *philosophical*
  
    – Systematically reveals research assumptions
    – Provides abstract common ground for dialogue
The Toolbox Project: Approach

An Instrument and a Workshop

• **The Toolbox Instrument**
  – A table of philosophical prompts that reveal fundamental assumptions about research and practice
  – These are structured into 2 categories: world and investigator
  – E.g.: “Scientific research must be hypothesis driven”

• **The Toolbox Workshop**
  – Begins and ends with participants scoring the Toolbox
  – 2-hour dialogue about research assumptions structured by the Toolbox
  – Various followup data collected
The Story of Wheels and Bridges

“How can two people so different relate so effortlessly?”

• The story of the Toolbox Project is the story of philosophy “bridging what can divide the spokes”

• Philosophy enables:
  – Common ground on which to integrate different professional ways of knowing
  – Better living for professionals and through professionals
The Story of Wheels and Bridges

• This is not necessarily “Kumbaya” or “We Are the World”
  – You want interdisciplinary and interprofessional partners because they are different
  – Differences imply disagreements, but tension can lead to resolution and insight
  – Think of negotiable disagreement as an achievement

• Living is hard, but it can be improved...
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Questions
Trust

**Core Question:** Does relevant work on climate science require partnerships between scientists and natural resource managers?

**Response:**

1. The products of scientific research are often not useful for making natural resource management decisions.
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - I don’t know
   - N/A

2. Natural resource managers should trust scientists because they are experts.
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - I don’t know
   - N/A

3. Scientists should have greater respect for the complexity of natural resource management decisions.
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - I don’t know
   - N/A

4. Managers should have greater respect for the constraints on publishable scientific research.
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - I don’t know
   - N/A

5. Science should have greater influence over natural resource management decisions.
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - I don’t know
   - N/A

6. In translating technical scientific language into language that a non-scientist can understand, important information is lost.
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - I don’t know
   - N/A