Objectivity and Truth: The role of the essay in management scholarship

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JMSSays was introduced at a symposium of the 2015 Academy of Management. During that session an audience member asked how business-school deans might evaluate the publication of an essay. The implication of the question was clear. Business scholarship is based on science and the essay is anything but scientific. So how could it "count" as knowledge?

The question betrayed the assumptive status order of how different knowledge forms are valued in business schools. Journal articles are legitimate. Books and book chapters are not. Introducing the essay into this gnostic hierarchy was unsettling, like inviting a philosopher to an accounting convention. As a form of knowledge, the essay was so foreign to the questioner's "order of things" that it simply did not make sense.

The cultural status order of legitimate management knowledge has co-evolved over many years with the growing popularity of business education. It has several curious characteristics that distinguish business schools from other academic disciplines. It is odd, for example, that books count for so little in business, when they are highly valued in the humanities. By citation count, books seem to have been quite influential in the history of management theory. Though we bemoan our inability to interest practitioners in the content of our journal articles, textbooks, which are the primary point of contact with practitioners, count

for very little, if at all. Like unfamiliar cultural standards of beauty such as foot binding in China and or ear stretching of the Maasai, the fundamental codes of a community often generates its own peculiar logics of worth.

I was reminded of the questioner's challenge to the legitimacy of the essay recently when reading a series of papers that describe a growing legitimacy crisis in management scholarship. The first was a paper that tried and failed to reproduce the findings of a number of studies in a prominent strategic management journal (Bergh, Sharp, Aguinis and Li, 2017). The second was a paper, currently working its way through the review process, that demonstrates serious issues of "p-hacking" in elite management journals. P-hacking is a term that describes the growing practice of selectively massaging the choice of statistical tests and/or data until a desired level of statistical significance is achieved. Ironically, in our evolving cultural status order of knowledge, the more puritan we become about "facts", the more likely we are to play fast and loose with them.

The essay is a unique genre that allows a scholarly community to overcome the dogmas of empiricism. As I demonstrate below, the essay has been effectively used to legitimate scientific knowledge, to establish its boundary conditions, to introduce epistemic humility and, perhaps most important of all, to normatively introduce new frontiers of knowledge.

The essay legitimates knowledge

The fact is a relatively recent historical innovation. Neither ancient Greek nor Latin offers an equivalent term (Wootton, 2015). The word "fact" enters common use in the English language in the latter 1600s with the establishment of

the Royal Society of London. The founders of the Royal Society were interested in establishing the legitimacy of facts over faith (Thompson, 1812). The Society sought to elevate the status of knowledge of the natural world, which, since medieval times, had always been considered forbidden and subordinate to religious knowledge.

The champion of fact was Sir Francis Bacon who advocated for science over metaphysics. Facts, Bacon argued, were for those who "determine not to conjecture and guess, but to find out and know" (Lyons, 1968: 4). Those interested in facts were "not to invent fables and romances of worlds, but to look into and dissect the nature of this real world." Bacon was not, himself, an "experimental philosopher". He left that to the emerging titans of science – Isaac Newton, Edmund Halley and Robert Hook. Rather, Bacon achieved his goal of legitimating science over religion not by engaging in the search for objective truth through science, *but by writing essays*. Indeed, Bacon can arguably share with Montaigne the title of the inventor of the essay.

Bacon's skilful use of the essay to help legitimate science illustrates well the heart of my argument. We valorize the primacy of "brute" facts in modern culture. Joe Friday's iconic catchphrase "Just the facts, Ma'am" conditions us to think we live in a world of pure objective empiricism, unmarked by emotion, opinion or 'spin'. But the ironic reality is that brute facts, like winged-horses, are aspirational ideals, that are rarely observed in nature. As Wootton (2015) observes in his artful critique of Hacking, any "objective" fact consists of three elements; a brute fact subject to empirical verification, a language-dependent fact which relies upon some shared vocabulary of meaning, and an institutional-fact that depends on a

normative system of evaluating facts. We don't "discover" facts, Wooten argues, we "establish" them.

Facts, thus, are a necessary but insufficient component of knowledge. Facts are established against the backdrop of a cultural system of organizing knowledge. Part of that system – the institutional part - is normative. And it is in this normative element of establishing fact that the essay finds it purpose. If true knowledge is constructed in a tripartite system of empirical discovery, linguistic articulation and institutional structure, the essay provides the primary vehicle through which we sift the evidence, find the right words and evaluate the implications of conferring the institutional status of fact on finding. The essay offers a genre for developing a shared system within which we contextualize, debate and contest the value of facts. *In good essays, facts and values interpenetrate and reinforce each other*.

The essay places epistemic bounds on knowledge

From Bacon, we see the power of the essay to legitimate certain knowledge forms as normatively superior to others. In Bacon's case it was to separate and elevate scientific knowledge from religious ways of knowing. Since then, the essay has played a critical role in establishing the boundary conditions of objectivity in science.

In some cases, the essay is effectively used as a corrective device to challenge scientists when they try to make knowledge claims beyond the grounds of objectivity. Perhaps the best example of the essay as a corrective device when science goes astray is offered by Stephen Jay Gould. An established scientist in his

own right, Gould was a prodigious essayist, generating over 300 of them in in his all too short career.

Gould's essays guided evolutionary scientists away from the rocky shores of sociobiology and psychobiology. These subjects, he argued, were the result of reckless overextensions of evolutionary theory into the realm of politics. He accused famous scientists of a lack of reflexivity and epistemic humility in assuming that science can answer questions about race and culture. "It is dangerous" Gould (1996: 36) wrote, "for a scholar even to imagine that he might attain complete neutrality, for then one stops being vigilant about personal preferences and their influences—and then one truly falls victim to the dictates of prejudice."

Gould used the essay to fight a vigorous battle against the authors of the controversial book *The Bell Curve,* where, he observed, claims of scientific objectivity were used to mask overtly racist arguments. "Objectivity" Gould (2000: 104-5) argued "cannot be equated with mental blankness; rather, objectivity resides in recognizing your preferences and then subjecting them to especially harsh scrutiny — and also in a willingness to revise or abandon your theories when the tests fail (as they usually do)." Gould skilfully wielded the essay to demonstrate the inevitable intersection of facts and values in science. The essay, thus, *provides a critical corrective function on essentialism in science*.

The essay can also play a corrective function through satire. This is perhaps best exemplified by Benjamin Franklin's famous essay about flatulence addressed to the Royal Academy of Brussels. His essay was written in response to perceived growing arrogance, pretentiousness and irrelevance of scientific research of the

time. The Academy had issued a call for Practical and Important scientific papers, as part of a somewhat desperate effort to reassert the relevance of science (not unlike the grandiose Grand Challenges that seem to populate our management journals today). Franklin (2003: 15) responded with a "Letter to the Royal Academy about Farting" in which he proposed as a Grand Prize Question "To discover some Drug wholesome & not disagreable, to be mix'd with our common Food, or Sauces, that shall render the natural Discharges of Wind from our Bodies, not only inoffensive, but agreable as Perfumes."

In these examples we see how the essay can provide an important foil to scientific objectivity. Through Bacon, the essay helped establish the legitimacy of science. Through Gould, the essay helped establish the boundary conditions of science. And, as we see with Franklin's satire, the essay re-established a degree of epistemic humility in the object of science. The goal of the essay is clearly distinct from the goal of the scientific research article. However, the two genres, when skilfully used, do not conflict. Rather, they reinforce and legitimate each other, even while pursuing different forms of claims to knowledge – objective knowledge in the case of the journal article and normative knowledge in the case of the essay.

The essay identifies frontiers of new knowledge

In some cases, however, the essay is used to expand boundary conditions and nudge scientists into new intellectual domains. Consider Rachel Carson's influential book *Silent Spring*. Even before the book appeared in print, advance excerpts appeared in essay form in the prestigious *New Yorker*. The essay, and the

book, were each profoundly unscientific in their presentation, and stunningly eloquent:

> And there was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? Many people, baffled and disturbed, spoke of them. The feeding stations in the back yards were deserted. The few birds to be seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices (Carson, 1962: 35).

Carson was a gifted writer and was "discovered" in 1937, well before the publication of Silent Spring when her essay "The World of Waters", originally written for a US government brochure, was published in *The Atlantic* as "Undersea". Carson's essays and, later, her books achieved far more impact than her work as a scientist in pushing biological scholarship into the emerging realm of environmental science. Carson demonstrated the capacity of the essay to explore the boundary of objective science by demonstrating the important difference between describing the way the world is and the way the world ought to be.

The value of the essay to explore the boundaries between objectivity and social norms is perhaps best illustrated by our colleagues in the dismal science of economics, where scholars have a long-standing distinction between normative and positive economics. Positive economics describes the world as it is and normative or "welfare" economics describes the world the way it ought to be. Over time, economists have offered a clear preference for the former (Robbins, 1932).

A number of prominent economists, from Veblen (1919) to McCloskey (1984), have challenged both the assumed clear separation of values and facts that underpins the distinction between positive and normative economics, as well as their relative importance in generating knowledge. Perhaps the most articulate objection is offered by Nobel Memorial Prize winner Amartya Sen whose body of

work, much of it written in the form of essays, focused attention on the incredible social, political and moral value of normative economics. His 1981 book *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* offered the observation that many famines occurred not because of a scarcity of food but rather because of inefficiencies in distribution systems. An earlier book, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*, first published in 1970 nudged the profession into a deeper consideration of social welfare issues in economics research. Sen wrote a powerful essay published in the *New York Review of Books* titled "More than 100 Million Women are Missing" which pointed to the systemic discrimination of women in the Asian economy.

Sen's key insight was to focus attention on the intersection between normative values and objective facts. Some normative judgements, he observed, are based on objective facts and have to be amended as the objective facts change. Other normative judgments, which he called "basic normative judgments", are based on deeply held beliefs or values not objective facts and, as a result, do not change with objective knowledge. Sen's distinction, significantly, draws attention to the important synthesis of positive and normative economics in which the former can and should be used to rationalize or justify the latter.

Essays Contextualize Knowledge

The stubborn fact is that all serious academic disciplines have struggled with their ability to make knowledge claims of truth, fact or objectivity. Noted University of Chicago historian Peter Novick, in his analysis of failed truth claims in the American historical profession referred to "the objectivity question" as "that noble dream" of identifying brute facts absent any human interpretation. Novick's

sensible conclusion, as any sociologist of knowledge will tell you, is that objectivity is an aspirational goal, an "ideal to be pursued by individuals [and] policed by the collectivity" (Novick, 1988: 2). Novick describes how the American historical profession, composed largely of white males, systematically excluded the history of women and minorities from their discipline under claims that these subjects lacked objective data sources.

Management theory, however, has largely ignored or avoided any serious discussion of our knowledge claims. Apart from a brief moment of open discussion about truth claims during the paradigm wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, management theory has become shockingly unreflective about its knowledge claims. Instead, we have become increasingly sensitive to our presumed lack of practical relevance which, periodically, generates Grand Challenges akin to the Royal Society of Brussels, but with an inevitable drift toward even more empiricism.

Generating more facts about management will never help us regain lost relevance. Relevance in scholarship occurs when facts meet values. The absence of an institutionalized space to discuss and challenge our knowledge claims or to engage in normative theorization, will inevitably lead to a fetishistic focus on facts absent values, a form of dustbowl empiricism. When we stop talking about the value assumptions that underlie our knowledge claims, and when we deny the institutional space to discuss the boundary conditions of our knowledge claims, we should not be surprised that our profession experiences periodic ethical lapses when making their value claims.

We live in a time when the not just the interpretation of facts, but the inherent objectivity of facts are openly contested by established institutional actors. We live in a time when the President of the United States can openly challenge the objective number of attendees at his inauguration mere moments after the event occurred, when the Polish government can legislatively contest the truth of the holocaust experience in their recent past, and when internet trolls can reprehensibly question the veracity of mass shooting victims' testimony of their horrifying experience. Because of this, now, more than ever, we need the essay.

Long live the essay!

I have described the critical role that the essay can play in legitimating our knowledge, in communicating our knowledge to non-academic audiences and in exploring the hinterland between facts and values. Most critical, however, is the capacity of the essay to allow us to explore different forms of knowing. Management scholarship is a syncretic form of knowledge that combines positive and normative ways of knowing and which requires a high degree of sensitivity to the interaction between facts and values.

Despite this, we have been negligently oblivious to the normative consequences of our science. While we, as a profession, have valorized the journal article, this is a genre of scholarly discourse that, for better or worse, is more aligned with the generation of technical, scientific or positive knowledge. The essay, and by extension, the book, are much better equipped to contextualize the brute facts in their normative context. As a profession we have woefully neglected the normative content of our knowledge base. In Aristotelian terms, we have done

an excellent job of describing the means of management, but we have failed miserably in answering more important questions about its ends – What is a good organization? Good leadership? Good management? Facts, alone, do not constitute knowledge, just as knowledge, alone, does not constitute wisdom.

So, to answer my colleague who asked how our deans will evaluate the essay as a form of knowledge, I would reply that you are asking the wrong question. The question of how our deans will evaluate the essay is an empirical question, one best assigned to the genre of the journal article. The real question is, how *should* the deans evaluate an essay? Perhaps you could write an essay about it.

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