



Methodological and Ideological Options

The relevance of epistemic analysis to sustainability economics and the capability approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how epistemic analyses (Birkin and Polesie, 2011; Foucault, 1970, 1990a, 1990b) may assist with the development of sustainability economics (Bartelmus, 2010; Baumgärtner and Quaas, 2010a, 2010b; and Söderbaum, 2011) and the capability approach (Ballet et al., 2011; Martins, 2011; Rauschmayer and Leßmann, 2011; Scerri, 2012).

It was the French social theorist Michel Foucault (1926–1984) who coined the term “episteme” to refer to the “possibility of knowledge” that determines the development of thought and knowledge in a given period. For Foucault epistemes were the “buried” foundations of knowledge that his epistemic “archaeology” could unearth. In 2007, Foucault was identified as the most cited author of books in the humanities by Thomson Reuters’ ISI Web of Science.

This paper begins with a brief definition and description of epistemic analyses. A summary analysis of the Modern episteme and neoclassical economics is then provided and this is followed by outline evidence for the emerging episteme. Finally the opportunity is considered for the emerging episteme to reinforce and enhance sustainability economics and the capability approach.

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1. Introduction

This paper considers how epistemic analyses (Birkin and Polesie, 2011; Foucault, 1970, 1990a, 1990b) may assist with the development of sustainability economics (Bartelmus, 2010; Baumgärtner and Quaas, 2010a, 2010b; Söderbaum, 2011) and the capability approach (Ballet et al., 2011; Martins, 2011; Rauschmayer and Leßmann, 2011; Scerri, 2012).

It was the French social theorist Michel Foucault (1926–1984) who coined the term “episteme” to refer to the “possibility of knowledge” that determines the development of thought and knowledge in a given period. For Foucault epistemes were the “buried” foundations of knowledge that his epistemic “archaeology” could unearth. In his 1970 book *The Order of Things: an archaeology of the human sciences*, Foucault revealed the incisive power of epistemic analysis in studies of the Renaissance, Classical and Modern periods in European history. It was a book that bestowed on him something close to rock-star status in his home country of France. In 2007, Foucault was identified as the most cited author of books in the humanities by Thomson Reuters’ ISI Web of Science.

Whilst Foucault’s more recent fame has to do primarily with his work on discourse and conditions of truth, this study returns to his first and foundational expression of epistemic analysis in *The Order of Things*

because evidence can be found that the dominant episteme for the last two hundred years, the Modern episteme, is being replaced. This means that the foundations of knowledge, thought and derivative institutions with which we are familiar can be subject to deep scrutiny, revisions and even rejection. An analysis of the Modern episteme, for example, reveals that neoclassical economics may be consigned to history as thought changes. On the other hand ecological economics may be presented as evidence of the emerging episteme because of the breadth of its broad, empirically grounded enquiry.

This paper begins with a brief definition and description of epistemic analyses. A summary analysis of the Modern episteme and neoclassical economics is then provided and this is followed by outline evidence for the emerging episteme. Finally the opportunity is considered for the emerging episteme to reinforce and enhance sustainability economics and the capability approach.

2. What are Epistemes?

Epistemes are abstract conceptions lying at the foundations of thought that are normally taken for granted. For Foucault (1970, p. xxii), an episteme is an “epistemological field” that creates “the conditions of possibility” for knowledge. This definition may be turned around for present purposes as we define an episteme as “that which makes knowledge possible”.

Epistemic analyses link metaphysics, ontology and knowledge. They provide a wealth of detail relating to the theoretical and practical

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consequences of any one episteme in a given period. These analyses for example provide valuable insight into the causes and potential remedies of unsustainable development.

According to Foucault to study an episteme is not to conduct a scientific enquiry since the elements and procedures of such an enquiry would be themselves consequences of an episteme. Nor is an epistemic study a historical account of what happened since this would be for any given period a study of the consequences of an episteme. Epistemic analysis is closer to an *archaeology*, an unearthing of an episteme as a conceptual artefact (Foucault, 1970, p. xxii).

It is a measure of the familiarity of the received ideas within an epistemic period which mean that an epistemic period other than our own would appear untenable, unworkable, deeply flawed or naïve. With regard to Foucault's epistemic archaeology, Gutting (2005, p. 41) observes: "Archaeology, then, shows us apparently 'impossible' modes of thought that were, nonetheless, quite possible for our not so distant intellectual ancestors."

This present study uses Foucault's epistemic archaeology to unearth ways of thinking that are starkly different from those with which we are familiar. Foucault's (1970) book "The Order of Things: an archaeology of the Human Sciences" provides the basics for the first part of this present study. The detailed retrospective analyses of Foucault's "The Archaeology of Knowledge" (1990) and other similar writings elaborate upon the method of "The Order of Things" do not add significantly to this study. In contrast, Foucault's (1991) more famous "genealogies" in such as "Discipline and Punish" and the "History of Sexuality Volume I: Introduction" (1990) are closer to *histories* than to an *archaeology* and are hence less relevant to this study.

An episteme may seem similar to the more popular concept of a paradigm that was introduced in Kuhn's (1962) book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions". From an epistemic perspective however a paradigm describes a *historical* situation in the evolution of science and as such it differs from an episteme since (i) epistemes themselves are not historic and it is their consequences that create history; and (ii) an episteme relates to the dominant order of knowledge for an *age* in major respects and it is not to be confined to a science. Furthermore the root meaning of a "paradigm" is derived from the ancient Greek word for "showing side by side" (Oxford English Dictionary) as, for example, with a template used to maintain the consistency of Greek column sculpting. In contrast a change in episteme occurs at a meta-level deeper than that of a technically or scientifically best example or typology. An episteme relates to the order of knowledge within which such best examples or typologies reside—an episteme may change a paradigm but not vice versa.

Additionally an episteme is more about *how* we know rather than *what* we know. For example, in Foucault's (1970) analysis of the Renaissance episteme, knowledge was made possible by finding resemblances and interpretations during a process of "reading" the whole world exactly as if reading a book. Renaissance minds occupied an undoubtedly God-given world and knowledge of this world was obtained by revealing or "unearthing" more of God's intent from the world—about just as effectively as it could be obtained from God's more focussed messages in the Bible. Knowledge in the Renaissance episteme was built up by revealing and interpreting resemblances and associations.

For the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) the Renaissance episteme appeared naïve and unsystematic. Descartes equated God with a rational mind and this observation contributed to a change in episteme from the Renaissance to the Classical. In the Classical episteme, the world was still accepted as a God-given totality but this time mankind took a step away from the world. Foucault (1970) describes knowledge acquisition in the Classical episteme starting with everything laid out flat on a table-top. This "everything" included all of time, finite and infinite, as well as fact and fantasy. Mankind could then look down on this table-top of all knowledge as an observer. For Descartes and the Classical episteme, knowledge was then made possible by *systematically* measuring and comparing the similarities

and differences of things on the table-top. In this way the whole of knowledge laid out on the table could be carefully differentiated and separated into parts.

Looking back from the Classical episteme, Descartes could no longer see the world as Renaissance minds had done—he could no longer make associations from mere resemblances and similitudes for his knowledge were established on the superior, more solid and reliable, possibility of orderly, systematic measurement.

Nobody creates an episteme. They are not the result of deliberate intent to limit or structure knowledge in any particular way. Epistemes simply arise as thought develops and for those engaged in an emerging episteme, it is a new possibility of knowledge replete with opportunities.

3. The Modern Episteme and Neoclassical Economics

For Foucault the Modern episteme began when the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) questioned the limits of representations. Kant no longer accepted the Classical table of all knowledge at face value for he argued in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) that "We can know a priori of things only what we ourselves put into them." Hence at the commencement of the Modern episteme, Classical metaphysics and ontology are effectively nudged aside by the intervention of man. Indeed it is in the nature of the Modern episteme that metaphysics and ontology are nudged aside: an anthropological approach emerges whereby ontology or metaphysics is reduced to a man-made epistemology. Without metaphysical and ontological security, Kant's questioning led to a general enquiry into origins and this is the mark of our own, the Modern episteme. The following sketch of the Modern episteme is based on Foucault (1970).

The Modern episteme's quest for origins meant that a God-given world was no longer accepted at face value. During the two hundred years of the Modern episteme from around 1800, empirical science has provided origins for many things from galaxies to quarks. This is of course not a complete account of origins for this would mean the end of enquiry and hence, perhaps, of humanity. But it does mean that we now possess scientific explanations of origins in great detail. Notwithstanding the arguments relating to the verification of scientific knowledge, this knowledge was not available when the Modern *possibility* of knowledge was established. It is only in recent years that origins for human sciences are being found.

Foucault (1970) argues that it is the distinguishing feature of the Modern episteme that origins are sought but not found with regard to the human sciences. This leads to a weakened and unstable metaphysics for the Modern human sciences. The preceding Renaissance and Classical epistemes could be derived from solid and undisputed God-given foundations whereas Modern human sciences were based upon an unfulfilled quest.

It is not possible to develop a body of knowledge without a metaphysical foundation—it simply does not start. In Modern human sciences the unfulfilled quest for origins had two important consequences both of which substitute for the weak metaphysics. The first consequence arises when Modern minds looked for origins for the work of man and all they found was ... the work of man. This creates a complicated, reflexive, surrogate origin for the Modern human sciences which is in essence a knowledge made *by* and *for* man: "Man's mode of being as constituted in modern thought enables him to play two roles: he is at the same time at the foundation of all positivities and present, in a way that cannot be termed privileged, in the element of empirical things" (Foucault 1907, p. 344). In this way Foucault argues that man appeared for the first time in Western culture "... as both that must be conceived of and that which is to be known" (Foucault, 1970, p. 345).

The appearance of man with an epistemological role was regarded as a Modern invention by Foucault, one that he called "epistemological man". Understanding the role of epistemological man is central to understanding Modern human sciences. Modern studies of man and society *could* not direct their attention outside man and society; it would be

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