

Practical knowledge and ethics

Tore Nordenstam

Received: 12 January 2013 / Accepted: 22 January 2013 / Published online: 13 February 2013
© Springer-Verlag London 2013

Abstract Systematic research in the wide field of practical knowledge is a recent phenomenon. In this paper, the approaches which have been developed in the main centres of research into practical knowledge in Norway and Sweden are compared with an emphasis on their potential for revitalizing the study of ethics. The focus on narratives and reflection based on the researcher's own professional experience which is the distinguishing feature of the centre for practical knowledge at the University of Nordland is seen as a very promising addition to the traditional repertory of ethical studies.

Keywords Practical knowledge · Skill and technology · Ethical theory · Applied ethics · Multifaceted concepts · Examples · Reflection · Scientific essay · Narrative form · The role of philosophy

1 Introduction

The use of technology, new and old, presupposes that the users have the practical knowledge, including ethics, which is required for handling it in an adequate way. What does that mean? The answer to this question is a never-ending story. Here, I shall limit myself to the more humble task of trying to explain why the new research field practical knowledge is not only a much-needed addition to traditional approaches to knowledge with their overemphasis on

theoretical knowledge but also a very promising supplement to the traditional repertory of ethical studies with their overemphasis on generalities and theories.

My reflections on practical knowledge and ethics build upon long personal involvement in those fields. In a study of Arabic ethical concepts in the 1960s (Nordenstam 1968), I worked out a perspective on ethics which has followed me ever since. Against that background, the beginnings of research into practical knowledge in the 1970s and 1980s were of great interest to me. I took an active part in some of the projects led by the Swedish pioneers in that field, Bo Göranson and Ingela Josefson, at that time (Göranson et al. 1976; Göranson 1978, 1984; Nordenstam 1980; Josefson 1985); and after the establishment of the research subject skill and technology in Stockholm in 1985 and the centre for practical knowledge in Bodø in 1997, I have followed their development both as a critical observer and as a visiting participant in various capacities.

2 Examples and concepts—circles of understanding

When I was a student in the small department of philosophy at the University of Gothenburg in the 1950s, Language, Truth and Logic (Ayer 1936) was one of the set texts. It was a piece of propaganda for the logical empiricists' views on such matters as knowledge, science, ethics and theology, very well-written, but rather disturbing for a young man like me who happened to be seriously interested in art and ethics. According to the young British philosopher (Ayer was 26 when the book was first published), moral judgments and aesthetic evaluations cannot be said to be true or false, valid or invalid; they are just expressions of feelings. Ethics and aesthetics are outside the realm of reason. Rational argumentation in those fields is impossible.

T. Nordenstam (✉)
Department of Philosophy, University of Bergen,
Bergen, Norway
e-mail: nordenstam.tore@gmail.com

T. Nordenstam
Hjalmar Brantings vei 63, 4153 Fyllingsdalen, Norway