



THE NATURE OF EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE SOCIAL DISCIPLINES

Área de investigación: Teoría de la administración y Teoría de la organización

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All epistemology begins in fear –fear that the world is too labyrinthine to be threaded by reason; fear that the senses are too feeble and the intellect too frail; fear that memory fades, even between adjacent steps of a mathematical demonstration; fear that authority and convention blind; fear that God may keep secrets or demons deceive. Objectivity is a chapter in this history of intellectual fear [...] But the fear objectivity addresses is different from and deeper than the others. The threat is not external [...] it is the individual who is suspect. Objectivity fears subjectivity, the core self. [...] But there is no getting rid of [...] post-Kantian subjectivity. Subjectivity is the precondition for knowledge: the self who knows [...and] the root of both knowledge and error.

L. Daston and P. Galison (2007: 372-4)¹

Introducción

The tenets of Classical Empiricism and the science of Isaac Newton overthrew ancient forms of thought with the conception of a rational universe governed by invariant universal laws, and hence, knowable and predictable. Empirical science could investigate the regularities observed in the world, and establish their causes as causes inherent in nature or in human nature, while rejecting any reference to non-empirical entities as mere speculation, and regarding theoretical entities only as working hypotheses. The struggle against all metaphysics as regressive and obscurantist forms of thought, outlined a scientific viewpoint under a rationality which could confront fiction and dogma, and in general, belief in the supernatural under any form. Indeed, science always was at the forefront of the struggle against authoritarianism and superstition. It is to science that we owe our greater intellectual freedom from religious beliefs, and the liberation of mankind from ancient and rigid forms of thought. (Feyerabend, 1975: 156.) Then the metaphysical dimension, which had been a genuine field of rational thinking became irrational and non-scientific; and this parting of science and philosophy was by itself a historical event. (Marcuse, 1964: 189, 202-3.)

Unquestionably, tenets of Logical Positivism remain today deeply ingrained in science such as scientific knowledge being established in research by contrasting hypotheses derived from theories against the empirical evidence of phenomena in the world, and progress in science being brought about by overthrowing earlier paradigms under a process that ultimately rests on this same evidence. In fact, it has been this view that relatively very recently has resulted in the suppression, not only in the sphere of science but also in Western Culture at large, of the conception associated with the Renaissance of laws of nature and indeed of a natural world designed, integrated and

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¹ All references contain the year of the original edition and the pages of the edition consulted.



animated by an intelligent mind, a divine creator. (Collingwood, 1945: 5.) However, there is an asymmetry between the effects these ideas have had as well as the status they are granted today both in science and in society, and the discredit associated with them both in philosophy of science and in epistemology.



In this context, this paper seeks to review questions about empirical knowledge and research, particularly in the social disciplines, illuminating this by drawing parallels to other types of knowledge, as follows: a) the foundations for analytical and empirical knowledge and their epistemic status; b) the epistemological problems of foundationalism, and the answers of some epistemologists to arguments against foundationalism; and c) the justification of the findings of quantitative research on natural and social phenomena by empirical evidence represented via conventional methodologies to constitute the foundation for empirical knowledge, and an analysis of the characteristics of empirical research and knowledge in the social disciplines.

