

# Ethos and Ideology of Knowledge Organization: Toward Precepts for an Engaged Knowledge Organization

Joseph T. Tennis

The Information School of the University of Washington,  
Box 352840, Mary Gates Hall, Ste 370, Seattle, WA, United States 98195-2840,  
<jtennis@uw.edu>



Joseph T. Tennis is an Assistant Professor at the Information School of the University of Washington and an Associate Member of the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Study at The University of British Columbia. He has been an occasional visiting scholar at the State University of São Paulo since 2009. He is Reviews Editor for *Knowledge Organization*, Managing Editor for *Advances in Classification Research Online*, and on the editorial board for *Library Quarterly* and *Scire*. He holds a Ph.D. in Information Science from the University of Washington. He works in classification theory, scheme versioning, and comparative studies of metadata.

Tennis, Joseph T. **Ethos and Ideology of Knowledge Organization: Toward Precepts for an Engaged Knowledge Organization.** *Knowledge Organization*. 40(1), 42-49. 10 references.

**ABSTRACT:** This paper provides rationale for considering precepts for an engaged knowledge organization based on a Buddhist conception of intentional action. Casting knowledge organization work as craft, this paper employs Žižek's conception of violence in language as a call to action. The paper closes with a listing of precepts for an engaged knowledge organization.

Received 6 June 2012; Revised 30 September 2012; Accepted 1 October 2012

## 1.0 Ethos and ideology

Ethos is the spirit that motivates ideas and practices. When we talk casually about the ethos of a town, state, or country, we are describing the fundamental or at least underlying rationale for action, as we see it. Ideology is a way of looking at things. It is the set of ideas that constitute one's goals, expectations, and actions. In this brief essay, I want to create a space where we might talk about the ethos and ideology in knowledge organization from a particular point of view, combining ideas and inspiration from the Arts and Crafts movement of the early twentieth century, critical theory in extant knowledge organization work, the work of Slavoj Žižek, and the work of Thich Nhat Hahn on Engaged Buddhism.

I will expand more below, but we can say here and now that there are many open questions about ethos

and ideology in and of knowledge organization, both its practice and products. Many of them in classification, positioned as they are around identity politics of race, gender, and other marginalized groups, ask the classificationist to be mindful of the choice of terms and relationships between terms. From this work, we understand that race and gender requires special consideration, which manifests as a particular concern for the form of representation inside extant schemes. Even with these advances in our understanding, there are still other categories about which we must make decisions and take action. For example, there are ethical decisions about fiduciary resource allocation, political decisions about standards adoption, and even broader zeitgeist considerations like the question of Fordist conceptions (Day 2001; Tennis 2006) of the mechanics of description and representation present in much of today's practice.

Just as taking action in a particular way is an ethical concern, so too is avoiding a lack of action. Scholars in knowledge organization have also looked at the absence of what we might call right action in the context of cataloguing and classification. This leads to some problems above and hints at larger ethical concerns of watching a subtle semantic violence go on without intervention (Bowker and Star 1999; Bade 2006).

The problem is not to act or not act, but how to act or not act in an ethical way, or at least with ethical considerations. The action advocated by an ethical consideration for knowledge organization is an engaged one, and it is here where we can take a nod from contemporary ethical theory advanced by Engaged Buddhism. In this context, we can see the manifestation of fourteen precepts that guide ethical action and warn against lack of action.

This paper pulls together four distinct lines of thought and brings each in its part to bear on the issue of intentionality in knowledge organization. In what follows, I will make an argument 1) for knowledge organization work as craft that uses words that are potentially instruments of violence—as conceptualized both by 2) critical theory in KO research and by 3) Žižek, and 4) that a framework for intentional action guided by a Buddhist ethical stance can serve as one amelioration to this violence, while doing justice to the ontology of knowledge organization work as craft. Each of these arguments is introduced in separate sections below. Each section ends with an assertion about knowledge organization work. Each assertion is presented as a formal assertion at the end of each section. I then use these assertions to talk about precepts for an engaged knowledge organization

In the following section, I will make some assertions about work and language in relation to the ethos and ideology present in the practices of indexing. I will start with conceptions of craftwork and move to a hermeneutics of suspicion (seeing a different perspective than many) manifest in the analyses of Slavoj Žižek. The result is a recasting of intention in indexing based on this composite frame of viewing work and the raw material of our indexing work, that is, language.

## 2.0 The Arts and Crafts Movement and assertion number one

William Morris responded to the advances of the industrial revolution by returning to nature and to history. His work surfaced in the milieu of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain (1850-1900). This move-

ment was a response to the Industrial Revolution. The development of the steam engine by James Watt in 1765 led to the mechanization of industry, agriculture, and transportation and changed the life of the workingman in Britain. Industrialization left people with a sense that their lives had changed for the worst. Many had sacrificed a rural lifestyle 'in England's green and pleasant land' for the sake of a job in the 'dark Satanic mills' of the Industrial Revolution. As a result, they lost that feeling of security and belonging which comes from living in smaller communities.

The members of the Arts and Crafts Movement included artists, architects, designers, craftsmen, and writers. They feared that industrialization was destroying the environment in which traditional skills and crafts could prosper, as machine production had taken the pride, skill, and design out of the quality of goods being manufactured. They were convinced that the general decline of artistic standards brought on by industrialization was linked to the nation's social and moral decline.

Knowledge organization as craft is implicit in many of the discussions of cataloguing, classification, and bibliography. For example, bibliography, the systematic description and enumeration of books, is, in my estimation, a craft. It is skilled work done with hand-held tools. These tools, the extant catalogues and classification schemes require specialized knowledge, often limited to only those that have apprenticed under another skilled bibliographer, or what we commonly call cataloguer. Their work combines learned practices, methods of analysis, and the creation of representations, which result in a bibliographic description. Bibliographic description, as an artifact, is born of this labor and is often described when well done as *beautiful* by peer bibliographers.

We can contrast this view of bibliography or knowledge organization with other work practices that do not honor skilled labor, apprenticeship, and are absent of aesthetic interest. Some consider bibliography as an act that requires no skill, that can be done by anyone, and is only functional, not a product of labor by a trained and skilled craftsperson. In recent developments in the Hathi Trust project, we have seen how this latter work ethic has resulted in low-quality metadata and a need for more skilled hands to create more robust and viable representations of the now millions of digitized volumes (York and Downie, 2012). This later view might be likened to the industrial view of labor, because as a work practice it erases the value of metadata created by craftspeople.

This leads us to our first assertion.

#### Assertion One:

We can see this historical conflict as a metaphor for conflicting stances on the work done in knowledge organization today.

We have artisanal work in our knowledge organization systems.

Work in knowledge organization does not have to be industrialized.

### 3.0 Assertion number two: critical theory, knowledge organization research, and right action

As it stands, there are many open questions about ethics in knowledge organization—its practice and products. Many of them, relevant to knowledge organization, but cast as classification research and positioned as they are around identity politics of race, gender, and other marginalized groups, ask the classificationist to be mindful of the choice of terms and relationships between terms. To highlight these concerns, scholars have invoked feminist “philosophy of the limit” (Olson 2002), queer theory (Campbell 2001), and critical race theory (Furner 2007). From this work, we understand that race and gender require special consideration, which manifests as a particular concern for the form of representation inside extant schemes and indexing languages. Even with these advances in our understanding, there are still other categories about which we must make decisions and take action.

For example, there are ethical decisions about fiduciary resource allocation, political decisions about standards adoption, and even broader zeitgeist considerations, like the question of Fordist conceptions of the mechanics of description and representation present in much of today’s practice versus a more Morris-esque Arts and Crafts version of the same (Day 2001; Tennis 2006).

Just as taking action in a particular way is an ethical concern (assigning suspect indexing terms to documents), so too is avoiding a lack of action. Scholars in knowledge organization have also looked at the absence of what we might call *right action* in the context of cataloguing and classification. This leads to some problems related to identity (mentioned above) and hints at the larger ethical concerns—namely watching a subtle semantic violence persist in our systems without intervention (Bowker and Star 1999; Bade 2006). What Bowker and Star discuss in their 1999 work is the accretion of compromises in systems of representation, and how a lack of control over the design context and

timeline can lead, inadvertently, to structures that do not benefit and, in fact, might be seen to hurt. Bade, for his part, discusses how it is possible to adhere to standard practice of representation in cataloguing and data entry into online bibliographic utilities, but still expend resources in the form of time and electricity to no helpful end. That is, we can maintain nonsense in online catalogues (which contain indexing work as well as cataloguing work) without impunity because we followed a standard practice. Thus, we must fully understand what kind of action we take and how such action might or might not be considered beneficial or, on the other extreme, violent.

In this case, violence can be understood as the expression of force against self or other, compelling action against one’s will on pain of being hurt. Violence is used as a tool of manipulation. Right action is understood as action for which one is responsible. If one understands the consequences of her or his actions, and they accord with engendering benefit, then the action can be said to be right action. It is the combination of understanding violence (in all its guises) and understanding right action (in what we do and what we chose not to do) that we can reflect on intention in indexing.

And if we are concerned with doing beneficial work with our scarce resources, we can make a second assertion.

#### Assertion Two:

Not taking right action in knowledge organization practice is an act of violence.

### 4.0 Žižek’s concept of violence and a third assertion

Slavoj Žižek in *Violence* describes three forms that frame our understanding of the same. Subjective violence, symbolic violence, and systemic violence (the latter two are both considered objective violence). Subjective violence is carried out by a subject, an actor, an identifiable agent. Clear examples of subjective violence are acts of crime, terror, civil unrest, and international conflict (Žižek 2008, 1).

The two forms of objective violence are not as obvious. In Žižek’s analysis, these other forms of violence are embedded and invisible to most of our observations. Žižek (2008, 2) writes:

Objective violence forms the status quo against which we measure subjective violence. Symbolic

violence is the universe of meaning imposed by a language on a group of people and systemic language. Systemic violence is the consequences (often catastrophic) of the smooth functioning of economic and political systems.

The most striking example of violence Žižek calls out is the violence of the liberal communist. This is someone who has made money (thereby taking it from others) and has turned around to “fix” problems in under-privileged and developing world contexts. This asserts a particular socio-political stratification—the liberal global capitalist democracy.

In indexing, it is easy to see that objective violence can surface in our work, because our work is rooted in what Žižek calls symbols and systems. First, we use the symbolic systems of language and its more refined subset of indexing languages—often controlled indexing languages. And we operate within systems, as defined by Žižek, that are part of the socio-political system—legitimated as components to help the (capitalist) democratic citizen.

Assertion Three:

Objective violence (symbolic and systematic) is potentially present in contemporary acts of indexing.

### 5.0 Assertion number four: toward and engaged, reflective, and intentional practice of knowledge organization

It would seem to me that if we buy the assertion that objective violence can surface in our work, then we have ethical decisions to make to prevent it. We must establish a reflective understanding of intention in indexing. If we establish the perspective that indexing, its practice and its products, are at least complicit in, if not tools for propagating violence as outlined above, we are then forced to engage with this new stance.

I would argue that the action advocated by an ethical consideration for knowledge organization, in this case right action, is an engaged one, and it is here where we can take a nod from contemporary ethical theory advanced by Engaged Buddhism. In this context, we can see the utility of precepts that guide ethical action and warn against lack of action.

Assertion Four:

Engaged knowledge organization acknowledges objective violence in our work and works toward

following guiding precepts to teach us how to work with awareness and to work less violently.

The emergence of an engaged indexing will have to be based on our understanding of how we might act in the practice of indexing to prevent violence. That is, we have to ask at what level of intention should we operate?

### 6.0 Levels of intention

The philosophy of intention operates in conjunction with other philosophical investigations. For our purposes, we can see indexers as possessing a high level of intention. That is, when they go to do their work, they intend on doing indexing. However, beyond this first level of intention, there are others. We can refine our conception of intention by saying that, simply because one acts does not mean one acts with the best of intentions. That is, we can assume that acting carries with it an ethical component. We can decide to act for benefit of ourselves or others, or we can act with the intention of harming others. If we conceive of indexers as interested in benefitting others, we can then begin to examine to what degree

Intention for our purposes is: performing an action for a specific purpose. If we want to believe we are doing good work, then we have to believe our intentions are good.

However, we immediately see the need for guidance. What happens if someone wants to do good work and works to provide access to the written word, but finds they have to not do certain level of cataloguing because of budgetary restrictions? Or say, someone wants to not harm animals, but accidentally steps on an insect? We can see a need to clarify intention here, in these two cases.

In order to solve the philosophical and ethical problem that surfaces from this scenario ethicists have constructed a two-part measure for considering how unwholesome an act is. This measure asks: what knowledge do we have of the act, and what is our level of intentionality when carrying out the act?

To this end we end up with two sets of measures.

Five Levels of Intentionality:

1. An action performed without intending to do that particular action—for example, accidentally treading on an insect—without any thought of harming;
2. If one knows that a certain kind of action is evil, but does it when one is not in full control of oneself, for example, when drunk or impassioned;

3. If one does an evil action when one is unclear or mistaken about the object affected by the action;
4. An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing, and knows that the action is evil. This is the most obvious kind of wrong action, particularly if it is premeditated;
5. An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing (as in 4), but does not recognize that one is doing wrong.

#### Measures of Knowledge of the Act:

- a) One is in a state of mind in which one knows one is doing that act (yes or no);
- b) One knows the act to be wrong, if it is intentionally done (yes or no).

These are binary measures (either yes or no) and are combined with intentionality to see the extent to which the act is unwholesome.

If we establish the perspective that knowledge organization, its practice and its products, are at least complicit in, if not tools for, propagating violence as outlined above, we are then forced to engage with this new stance.

I would argue that the action advocated by an ethical consideration for knowledge organization, in this case right action, is an engaged one, and it is here where we can take a nod from contemporary ethical theory advanced by Engaged Buddhism. In this context, we can see the manifestation of precepts that guide ethical action, and warn against lack of action.

Though this is a marked secularization of the religious concepts present in Buddhism (Engaged or otherwise), it does not lose any of its applicability to the professional environment. That is, though we call this Buddhism, it is, in fact, more philosophy than not. If we remove the core belief that we are setting ourselves free by removing suffering (a religious conception of action), with the belief that we are helping others change their lives for the better through access to information (an ethical conception of action, specifically knowledge organization), then we can trade one for the other without losing the applicability of considering intention and our mental states when engaging in action, and again, specifically when we are engaging in knowledge organization.

In an effort to help guide action given the points on intentionality and knowledge of the act outlined above, we can perhaps work with precepts—or ways of judging actions—that specifically wed knowledge organization actions and conceptions of right action

drawn from the ethical base of Engaged Buddhism. In order to root this discussion in the latter, I have drawn on Thich Nhat Hanh's writing on precepts for an *Engaged Buddhism* (Nhat Hanh 1998).

## 7.0 Precepts for an engaged knowledge organization

What follows is a list of nine precepts that I believe are useful for us to consider and debate in the context of an engaged knowledge organization—its concepts and praxis. The nine precepts are titled by me, have their foundation text from Nhat Hanh quoted (1998), and a commentary also written by me.

### 7.1 *The precept of bound by doctrine*

Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist [professional] ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.

Here we can see that we are attempting to get a symbolic violence through detachment. We don't need our identity permanently attached to doctrine, theory, or ideology (even professional ones). This then allows us to act in an engaged way when we organize knowledge, but not act in a dogmatic way.

### 7.2 *The precept of knowledge changes*

Corollary 1: Schemes need to change

Corollary 2: You must constantly learn new knowledge

Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.

Here we see an amplification of the first precept. And it is key for semantic, conceptual, and reference violence. We have to be able to change our schemes should violence appear in them, to learn our whole working life (and beyond).

### 7.3 *The precept of harm (violence) in knowledge organization*

Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrow-mindedness.

Here we see that a major part of acknowledging violence in knowledge organization is the commitment to educate, but only through dialogue and only by avoiding fanaticism and narrow-mindedness—even in thinking we are doing the right thing by helping to change violence.

### 7.4 *The precept of acting because you have knowledge*

Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

For engaged knowledge organization, this relates directly to the belief that we should upon being educated on the presence of violence in KO, not close our eyes to it.

### 7.5 *Precept of sharing and connection with all*

Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.

Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as they arise, turn your attention to your breath in order to see and understand the nature of your hatred.

Here we see the need to eliminate the ego-self, a distinctively Buddhist concept, but one that I think plays well into an engaged conception of knowledge organization and puts us in check as well. We are not saviors. We are not hoarders of conceptual knowledge. We are not in a position to harbor anger or ha-

ted. We are here to share and make better through our work in knowledge organization.

### 7.6 *Precept of joyful work at the present moment*

Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. Be in touch with what is wondrous, refreshing, and healing both inside and around you. Plant seeds of joy, peace, and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.

And even if we aren't the center of the universe, our health is important to organizing knowledge. We have to feel joy and peace in order to carry out the work, and what's more, we need to lead by example.

### 7.7 *Precept of right language*

Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.

Here we see that speech is an important factor, but more to our purposes in engaged KO, we can see the power of language represented in these precepts. When we acknowledge violences in KO, then we must speak truthfully but not sew conflict.

### 7.8 *Precept of good vocation*

Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that

deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realise your ideal of compassion.

Here we see Thich Nhat Hahn address his Buddhist community specifically. For us, it would be the community of engaged KO researchers. And we can also see how we benefit and do not benefit from this vocation.

### 7.9 Precept of scarce resources

Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realisation of the Way. (For brothers and sisters who are not monks and nuns:) Sexual expression should not take place without love and commitment. In sexual relations, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings.

Here we see the primacy of integrity as it relates to individual human beings and their means of living a happy life. If engaged knowledge organization is built on the practices paid for by others, using natural resources as well as people-power, then we have to act with an ethical imperative on helping them realize their full potential through interaction with the written record—through organized knowledge.

Thus there are nine precepts proposed here for an engaged knowledge organization: 1. the precept of bound by doctrine, 2. the precept of knowledge changes, 3. the precept of harm (violence) in knowledge organization, 4. the precept of acting because you have knowledge, 5. the precept of sharing and connection with all, 6. the precept of joyful work at the present moment, 7. the precept of right language, 8. the precept of good vocation, 9. the precept of scarce resources.

## 8.0 Concluding remarks

I have made four assertions in the course of this paper:

1. We can see this historical conflict between the Industrial Revolution and the Arts and Crafts Movement as a metaphor for conflicting stances on the work done in knowledge organization today.
2. Not taking right action in knowledge organization practice is an act of violence.
3. Objective violence (symbolic and systematic) is potentially present in contemporary acts of knowledge organization.
4. Engaged knowledge organization acknowledges objective violence in our work and works toward following guiding precepts to teach us how to work with awareness and work less violently.

It seems that assertion 1 is not linked to the others. Now we can connect assertion 1 with the rest. In order to make tractable the idea of precepts in engaged knowledge organization, we need to acknowledge the conflict present in contemporary bureaucratic practices of knowledge organization and the art and craft of description.

In order to make tractable the idea of precepts in engaged knowledge organization, we need to acknowledge the conflict present in contemporary bureaucratic practices of knowledge organization and the art and craft of description.

We have a systemic violence at work in the factory life of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. It might be possible to see systemic violence at work in the bureaucratic routine in the design and maintenance of knowledge organization systems—especially those that privilege standardization over aiding users reach their full potential through access. The upshot then is perhaps a need for an artistic turn in descriptive practices. And with the artist turn in knowledge organization, realize that we have agency and can operate with intention in carrying out the work of cataloguing, indexing, and classification scheme design. That there is an ethos and ideology in our work and that we can begin to debate the merits of working in an engaged way, understanding our intentions, and test for ourselves whether or not working with precepts is a helpful way forward in knowledge organization.

## References

- Bade, David. 2006. Colorless green ideals in the language of bibliographic description: making sense

- and nonsense in libraries. *Language and communication* 27: 54-80.
- Bowker, Geoffrey and Star, Susan Leigh. 1999. *Sorting things out: classification and its consequences*. Cambridge: MIT.
- Campbell, D. Grant. 2001. Queer theory and the creation of contextualized subject access tools for gay and lesbian communities. *Knowledge organization* 27: 122-31.
- Day, Ron E. 2001. Totality and representation: a history of knowledge management through European documentation, critical modernity, and Post-Fordism. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 52: 725-35.
- Furner, Jonathan. 2007. Dewey deracialized: a critical race-theoretic perspective. *Knowledge organization* 34: 144-68.
- Nhat Hahn, Thich. 1998. *Interbeing: fourteen guidelines for engaged Buddhism*. Berkeley: Parallax.
- Olson, Hope A. 2002. *The power to name: locating the limits of subject representation in libraries*. Boston: Kluwer.
- Tennis, Joseph T. 2006. Social tagging and the next steps for indexing. In Furner, Jonathan and Tennis, Joseph T, eds., *Proceedings 17th Workshop of the American Society for Information Science and Technology Special Interest Group in Classification Research*, Austin, Texas. Available <http://journals.lib.washington.edu/index.php/acro/article/viewFile/12493/10992>
- York, J. and Downie, S. J. 2012. Data in detail. Presentation at the HathiTrust Research Center, UnCamp 2012. Available [htrc-uncamp2012-york\\_htrc\\_uncamp\\_sep\\_2012\\_-\\_long.pdf](http://htrc-uncamp2012-york_htrc_uncamp_sep_2012_-_long.pdf).
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2008. *Violence*. New York: Profile Books.