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ENTREPRENEURING AND THE HUMAN ENTERPRISE: WHERE PRIVATE OBSESSION MEETS PUBLIC NEED (SUMMARY)

Susan Harmeling

Howard University, sharmeling@howard.edu

Troy Harting

The United States Air Force Academy

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SUMMARY

ENTREPRENEURING AND THE HUMAN ENTERPRISE: WHERE PRIVATE OBSESSION MEETS PUBLIC NEED

Susan Harmeling, Howard University, USA
Troy Harting, The United States Air Force Academy, USA

Principal Topic

We borrow from Rorty (1989:37) to define entrepreneuring as the process through which “private obsession” fulfills “public need.” This definition, and a fresh look at contingency, allow us to do three things. First, we reconcile conflicting notions of entrepreneurial opportunity. Second, we clarify the roles of individual and collective in the process of entrepreneuring. Finally, we extend entrepreneurial action from the exclusive realm of existing commercial markets into the broader realm of human enterprise in general.

Method

Pragmatist philosophers such as Rorty, Dewey and Goodman have written extensively about the convergence of the public and the private around contingency. We explore their ideas through six narratives whose subjects range from “traditional” entrepreneurs to educational entrepreneurs to political entrepreneurs. All of these narratives illustrate how entrepreneurs use contingency to fuse private circumstance and public need, a process that we argue is at the heart of human progress in general.

Results and Implications

The last decade has seen a lively debate over the ontological status of opportunity. Do opportunities exist objectively, independent of those who would pursue them, or are opportunities constructed, fully dependent on the entrepreneur to breathe life into an idea borne of his or her background, skills and predilections?

A contingency-driven view of this debate concludes that it misses the point, mostly because it each side chooses an aspect of contingency on which to focus – historical or personal – and ignores the other. Contingency operates on a number of levels simultaneously, providing for a kaleidoscopic view of opportunity generation and exploitation where closing one window may open several others.

By focusing on only one aspect of contingency, entrepreneurship scholars miss the true nature of the “nexus of individual and the opportunity” suggested by Shane and Venkataraman (2000). Contingency is an essential element of entrepreneurship because it governs not only the residue of historical accidents that constitute today’s playing field but also the makeup of the players who seek to impose their will upon it. The interplay of the two is what allows a would-be entrepreneur’s private obsession to blossom and find acceptance as it fills some unmet public need.

CONTACT: Susan S. Harmeling; sharmeling@howard.edu; harmelings@aol.com; (T): 202-806-1585; Howard University School of Business.