Good is Dead: Practical Wisdom and the Ends of Management Education

Abstract

How might we twist free from the hold the technocratic regime has over us in our ability to be and to act in the world? Can business and management be a space in which this happens, and can management education nurture the dispositions and capabilities which might ground such a space?

In this developmental paper we want to explore the question of practical wisdom, and to suggest that, although Aristotle's notion of *phronēsis* has been (re)cited by many management education scholars as having the potential to contend the dominance of the techno-rational and technocratic regime, it has not been read in the radicality it demands.

Working with and against the traditional reading of the 'Good' as the supreme, transcendent value which lies beyond the complexities of the everyday, we want to suggest that it is only through a cultivation of practical wisdom as deliberative insight and judgement revealed in and through language as *logos*, that business and management might itself begin to situate the notion of the Good amongst the most urgent challenges of our day.

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Re-orientating the ends of management education

Introduction

This years' conference asks how we might 'reimagine' business and management as a 'force for good'. This suggests two, related issues: 1) that business and management *has not yet been* a force for good, and 2) that the notion of the good proposed somehow transcends business and management as its teleological end, as that *in the service of which* a certain dynamic or 'force' of business and management might operate. Such a notion of the good would, then, be the ultimate end towards which any number of business and management practices, be they positive or negative, force or will us towards. This metaphysical notion of a transcendental or supreme good suggests all is acceptable in our quest towards it. In this sense the good is that against which business and management might be measured (but as a value which is always somehow short of its aim), as well as that which lies beyond business and management; that which is determined in another realm such as ethics, politics or philosophy.

Working with and against this transcendental notion of the good, we want to revisit the question of 'practical wisdom', and ask how its place in business and management education might help us reimagine the notion of the good at the situational heart of everyday praxis. We want to suggest that it is through an engagement with the virtues and qualities expounded in and through practical wisdom that business and management might itself begin to *situate* the notion of the good amongst the most urgent challenges of our day.

Re-imagining the *technics* of management education

Our obsessive-compulsive way of relating to scientific methodologies appears to have led to a belief that empirical validation and evidence-based techniques account as *the* only valid source for practical knowledge (Polkinghorne 2004). Indeed, Ronald Beiner, one of the leading scholars on the topic of human judgement, warned a long time ago that: 'the simple exercise of reflective judgement comes increasingly to be regarded as outmoded. There seems to be neither place nor status for the power of ordinary human judgement, that is, for the capacity for making sense of the things around us that is unaccountable in, and cannot be submitted to, the terms of technical rationality' (Beiner 1983: xv).

Technocratic modernity has brought growth, globalisation and a certain notion of 'progress'. It has also witnessed genocide and world war. Military conflict, climate change, and a series of economic, ecologic and epidemiologic crises continue to affect our lives, with the ability to respond to such crises borne

from the same technocratic regime in which they emerge. How might we twist free from this pattern, and from the hold the technocratic has over us in our very ability to be and to act in the world? Can business and management be a space in which this happens, and can management education nurture the dispositions and capabilities which might ground such a space?

Unfortunately, it seems that nowhere is our compulsion towards techno-scientific reasoning more widespread and engrained than in the institutions tasked with the education of those who seek to manage and lead organisations, namely business and management schools. Whilst managerial practices and management education are by no means linked unproblematically or simplistically, management education has 'for better or worse, a crucial role [to play] in producing and reproducing the practices of management' (Huczynski 1993 in French & Grey 1996: 2). The relationship between (and application of) techno rational approaches to; 1) "management science" perceived as a discipline on par with business economics and finance; 2) managerial conduct (whether understood as a craft, an art or a rational profession) and, 3) management educational programmes offered by the growing number of management schools across the UK, is at best uneasy and at worst problematic. But it is precisely this 'reproduction' of the norms and formulas of business and management education – a certain *technics* of management education – that we want to twist free from.

As illustrated by recent discourse in management and organisation studies, the field of management education is itself undergoing a crisis, with scholars questioning the normative orientation within which business and management schools operate; the tools, skills and knowledge that are being transmitted, and the pedagogical approaches deployed (Bachmann et al 2014). In particular, Bennis and O'Toole (2005), Ghoshal (2005), and Mintzberg (2013) suggest that business and management schools have contributed to a culture which has churned out dangerous and inadequately trained managers. On the one hand, techno-rationalism has been implicated in leading to a dangerous denial of ethical considerations, with schools having allegedly 'freed their students from any sense of moral responsibility' (Ghoshal 2005: 76). On the other, technocratic approaches to management education fail to grasp the nature of practical knowledge and judgemental processes that underpin good management practices (Shotter & Tsoukas 2014; Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003; Pfeffer & Fong 2002). Management scholars have stipulated that the rising discontent plaguing management in general and 'bad' managerial judgement in particular has its root cause in business and management school ideology. According to this line of argument, the theories and ideas taught at business and management schools 'have done much to strengthen the management practices that we are all now so loudly condemning' (Ghoshal 2005: 75). Others are no less scathing when describing what they believe to be the symptoms of the

widespread 'organisational, managerial and political hubris', namely the arrogance, complacency, and narcissism displayed by so many contemporary managers (Küpers & Pauleen 2013).

Against the backdrop of growing criticism about management ideology in general, and management education in particular, educators as well as practitioners have called for a renewed management educational framework that entails 'knowledge of methods or concepts associated with the true nature of a subject being investigated' (Suprenant 2012: 225). As long ago as the mid-90s, French and Grey (1996: 3) acknowledged that the 'content and, perhaps methods of management education need to be quite radically altered in order to equip managers with the ability to work effectively in an ambiguous and rapidly changing world.' The extent of the scope of the desired reform fluctuates between those who seek to add additional courses to management programmes such as critical thinking (Antonacopoulou 2010), and those who believe that a deeper reform is needed, one which leads to business and management schools actively teaching virtues (i.e. humility, generosity, honesty and patience), thereby helping form managers and leaders who have 'character rather than just charisma' (Giacalone and Wargo 2009:166) and are able to cultivate 'good habits of thought and behaviour' utilising 'a repertoire of tacit skills and knowledge, that make her more perceptive, adaptive, and mentally resilient in environments of deep complexity' (Thiele 2006: 280).

Re-reading *phronēsis*

A response to this critique, one found in disciplines such as management learning, organisational learning and business ethics, is the rediscovery of Aristotle's thinking on *phronēsis,* or 'practical wisdom' (Tsoukas & Cummings 1997) As a consequence, there is a growing number of management scholars who have become re-enchanted with this way of being and acting in the world. Much of this enchantment rests upon the hope that the recovery of practical wisdom will bring about a much-needed panacea against a wide range of organisational failures, leadership scandals and social ills more generally. According to Bachmann et al (2017), practical wisdom can act as a remedy against abstract managerial knowledge taught in the business school and instead leads the way to a preoccupation with practical skills, as well as the moral and social aspects of organisational life. Furthermore, practical wisdom is seen not only as an 'antidote to human overconfidence and the managerial hubris that often follows' (Küpers & Pauleen 2013:), but it is also portrayed as an antidote to 'unwise' decision making (Gibson 2008) and bad management practices which, if reformed, could play an important role in remoralising the business school student body (Small 2004).

Although the quest for wisdom has preoccupied civilisations for millennia, it was Aristotle who first 'developed a systematic understanding of what constitutes a practically wise person' in book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he stated that such people 'are open to receive and understand each particular situation as it is', gain not only 'the theoretical knowledge and the experience to choose and apply the fitting means', but also 'the excellence of character to define the right ends' (Bachmann et al 2017: 149). For Aristotle, human happiness and wellbeing rely on our ability to succeed at the following three tasks in life: *theoría*, *technē* and *praxis*. Each task requires a different form of reasoning for its accomplishment (Polkinghorne 2004). *Theoría* entails the use of epistemic or scientific knowledge, *technē* utilises craft or productive knowledge and praxis makes use of practical wisdom, drawing on *theoría* and *technē* simultaneously. Importantly, a practically wise person has the capacity to determine when, where and how rules are applied and how they are best modified in terms of a given situation (Polkinghorne 2004: 153). Thus, practical wisdom is considered the master virtue as it enables the judge to decide when, where and how to deploy episteme and *technē* (Irwin 1999). Crucially, for Aristotle, practical wisdom hinges on a specific form of praxis, an 'acting-well' (*eupraxia*), which in turn requires the specific form of knowledge known as *phronēsis*. As William McNeil translates, *phronēsis* 'refers to knowledge belonging to human praxis insofar as such activity constitutes an end in itself. It is described [by Aristotle] as "a disclosive disposition that occurs by way of logos [*hexis alēthē meta logou*]. Concerned with action in relation to *what is good and bad for human beings*" (NE, 1140, b7)' (McNeill, 1999: 34 (*our emphasis*)).

We suggest that, although *phronēsis* has been (re)cited by many management education scholars as having the potential to contend the dominance of the techno-rational and technocratic regime, and often through a Heideggerian lens, it has not been read in the radicality it demands. Albeit a praiseworthy attempt to bridge the gap between 'purely theoretical knowledge and practice-orientated skilfulness guided by moral virtue' (Musiyiwa 2016: 31), the re-emergence of practical wisdom in business and management education is based on an intellectual conception of practical wisdom which is so far removed from both the management classroom and managerial conduct as to render it unintelligible and unpractical for students, practitioners, and educators alike. Our paper argues, then, that if such a re-reading were made, it would help re-orient the ends of management education away from a transcendental notion of the supreme good which justifies all activity under its horizon, to a specific praxis of being in the world, with and amongst others, which seeks to disclose the good in our very activity as the truth of being itself. It is here, then, that management education can inform business and management practices through a pedagogy which puts the question of the good continually in question,

as that which is *yet to be decided*, and therefore a 'radically finite, and thus infinite task, one that must be accomplished ever anew' (McNeill, 1999: 36).

How we plan to develop the paper prior to discussion/presentation at the conference:

There are several ways in which the paper could develop. Following Martin Heidegger's reading of Aristotle, we could read the notion of the good (as *Agathon*) as that which would allow for a situated praxis of *phronēsis*; a praxis whereby the good is put in question (situated as and at the limit (as *peras*)) at each and every moment of decision. This would situate *phronēsis* as that which complicates the current technocracy of reproducible skills in management education, and which condenses and combines the possibility of ethics, judgement and innovation through a profound rethinking of pedagogy. Additionally, as the role of *logos* in *phronēsis* is understated in the literature of business and management education, we would like to redirect an emphasis on *language* as the disclosive site of practical wisdom; the site where being as such, as the site of decision and the future, are at stake.

A related question, and one which is central to our paper, is the question of whether attempts to rethink management education might be able to cultivate the array of dispositions required for appropriate business judgement in managers-to-be. According to Gibson (2008: 529), management educators need to discover 'procedures for its development, rather than relying upon chance and many years of workplace experience', although the notion of 'procedure' would need to interrogated a little here. Despite some notable exceptions in the critical management literature, ones including early pioneers such as Follett (1918) and contemporary writers such as Leavitt (1989), Ghoshal (2005), Antonacopoulou (2010), Cunliffe (2016), and Hay (2019), Mackay et al (2014), Brown et al (2015), little empirical research exists and thus we concur with Bachmann's assertion that: 'little effort has been devoted so far to provide substantive guidance on how to apply practical wisdom to management practice and even less to examine the specific factors and conditions that foster or hinder practically wise decisions in managerial contexts' (2017: 127). This particular theme is something we would hope to develop further at the conference.

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