



Wisdom, management and organization

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Introduction

The motive of success is not enough. It produces a short-sighted world which destroys the sources of its own prosperity ... A great society is a society in which its men of business think greatly about its function. Low thoughts mean low behaviour, and after a brief orgy of exploitation, low behaviour means a descending standard of life. (Alfred North Whitehead, Lecture given at Harvard Business School, 1932, published in *Adventures of ideas*, 1933, pp. 119–120)

The last three decades have witnessed a spate of spectacular failures in the management of established and well-known financial institutions. The collapse of Barings Bank where directors were eventually ruled to be unfit to run a company; the spectacular demise of Long Term Capital Management, a brain-child of two Nobel prize winners, where after purporting to have discovered a fail-safe, scientific method for calculating derivative prices, lost US\$4.6 billion in the first few months of 1998 and threatened a bank run that required active intervention on the part of the Federal Reserve in the United States, and of course, the slow and silent crescendo of headless and reckless decisions that climaxed in the financial crisis of 2008 where a significant number of established financial institutions had either to be nationalized or file for bankruptcy after being in independent existence for over a century. We continue to experience the long-drawn after-effects of this

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latest financial crisis, and there is much concern expressed in the media daily that little seems to have been learnt from this financial debacle.

The capacity for exercising vision and prudence in passing judgment has, it seems, deserted many working in the financial industries, and this lack appears to have spilled over into many other industries as well. The maximization of profits and shareholder value predominate over all other concerns relating to the needs and expectations of the wider community. Success is measured solely in terms of economic returns rather than public satisfaction. What's 'good, right and just for everyone' (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011: 59), no longer inform decision-making, expediency, self-interest and even unbridled greed govern the motivational framing of resource allocation. The ability to appreciate what is 'just for society while being grounded in the details of the ever-changing front line' (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011: 60) is missing short-termism, a penchant for the spectacular and the overriding concern for achieving quick self-gain remains dominant among many key decision-makers both in industry and in public office. Little seems to have been learnt from these crisis events which continue to reverberate throughout the developed world with wide-ranging consequences for ordinary everyday lives. Post-2008, despite some token public show of breast-beating and an almost deafening clamour from politicians, the public and the media for regulatory reform, little has changed structurally. Substantial sums of money are still being paid out, imprudently, not just to the successful, but to individuals actually responsible for these failures and for subsequent impoverished performances, while many ordinary tax payers continue to pick up the bill for the gargantuan losses that resulted from the ignorance, excesses and irrational exuberance that characterized what was then a largely run-away global financial system. There remains a notable reluctance for serious structural reform that is accompanied by the prudent exercise of self-restraint in the interest of the common good.

Despite the evident weaknesses and even failings of an unregulated 'free market' economy, where it has become clear through this financial crisis experience, that excesses in risk-taking can create a perverse set of circumstances in which profits are privatized, while the burden of losses incurred is astonishingly born by the public at large, the undiluted ambition for individual self-gain continues to be rigorously defended. The theoretical justification for such self-interested behaviour ostensibly derives from a partial and truncated reading of the 'father' of modern capitalism, Adam Smith (1776/1910) whose most quoted line in the *Wealth of Nations* – 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest' (p. 20) – has often been used to justify the pre-occupation with self. Forgotten are his equally trenchant admonitions against those who overlooked their responsibility and concern for the well-being of others in society when he wrote, 'No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable' (Smith, 1776/1910: 83). Even lesser known is his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith, 1759/2009) where he wrote passionately about the importance of sympathy for others as a source of 'fellow-feeling' (p. 27) in the conduct of human affairs and warned about the tendency to 'parade our riches' (p. 163) to gain the respect and admiration of others. Blinded by their own self-ambition, those who were directly or indirectly responsible for the recent financial crisis chose to throw caution to the wind and to inflict the unmeasurable consequences of their reckless actions on the innocent and mostly hard-working public for whom financial institutions had played such a crucial stewarding role in wealth creation in the recent past.

Much of this is well-trodden comment. Yet, the financial crisis is an interesting example because the opportunities for arbitrage that gave rise to it arose from an absence as much as the presence of knowledge. Finance is an industry reliant upon, and driven by, an experience of lack and/or uncertainty; its disorienting affects serving as potential sources of advantage. This is what the very few who made money from the crash will attest to. Here, knowledge is a relative not a universal good,

its value being more a function of its scarcity rather than something inherent in its 'content'. Many of those calling for post-crisis reform recognize this and advocate a need for greater transparency and oversight via publicly and politically sanctioned systems of regulation, which would, were they feasible and functional, limit the territory upon which such restricted information – and hence ignorance – can be exploited. The tendency for wild speculation would then be somewhat curbed. The bet sizes and potential margins for gain would reduce, and the number of bets being placed would diminish, making the system far less susceptible to a headless rush toward self-destruction. Any such refinement of regulation, though, will stipulate in more detail the unregulated cracks in which opportunity might be found – the grid may be tighter, but there will always be gaps. Relatedly, there is recognition that information and knowledge are never innocent; they can be employed to create intrigue from which people can get hurt.

Within this tense, distorting socio-economic context that remains overwhelmingly driven by an instrumental-calculative form of rationality, justified by a 'consequentialist theology' (March, 2003: 205), whereby actions are evaluated solely on the basis of their ability to achieve tangible self-gain, it is timely to consider the role of wisdom in decision-making. Far from being a mere synonym for knowledge and expertise, to be wise is to acknowledge the limits and limitations of formal knowledge and its sometimes undesired effects, how it twists and turns the world, folding it into shadows as much as it opens up novel possibilities for consideration. Where knowledgeable agents often presume to occupy a privileged vantage point surveying affairs of the world – a place from which to objectively analyse, explain and then exploit – the wise more mindfully embrace the inherent ambiguity of working from within a specific set of particularistic circumstances, guided not so much by expert knowledge as by a cultivated predisposition to act in the interest of the greater common good. Freed from the over-confidence of expertise and the hubris that often follows it, the wise remain cognizant that knowledge and ignorance are inseparable bedfellows and that it is therefore knowledge of ignorance that makes for what is wise. This is something Socrates well understood. Where knowledge is all sharp edges, confident certainty and clean light, wisdom comes with the patina of age; these sharp edges, certainties and clean surfaces become blunted, knocked and tarnished through use. Wisdom involves awareness that 'to know' is always to 'owe' (Chia and Holt, 2007: 508), that a hidden debt or 'gap' underlay all forms of knowledge and that with every revelation comes concealment and with every seemingly objective claim comes an unstated and unacknowledged personal and collective emotional involvement. To be wise is to be learned about our ignorance.

From knowledge to wisdom

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? (Eliot (2001), *The Four Quartets*)

Wisdom has enjoyed an inverted history; while it seemed to have been pre-eminent in ancient thought, it has, as civilization has 'progressed', slipped away from the collective consciousness and been replaced by more technical concerns with objectivities, control, prediction and outcomes. Recently, however, perhaps in the wake of repeated warnings about the limits of experts and their expertise, coupled to our continuing experience of social, economic and environmental uncertainties and upheavals (Beck, 2009: 6–10), wisdom has begun to enjoy a revival as a subject of scholarly concern, at least in management and organization studies. Cummings (1996) talks of a need to return to ancient forms of knowledge; Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) attempt to show how real expertise is far from a dry, technical science; Eikeland (2008) and Flyvbjerg (2001) call for

practical wisdom to percolate throughout research practice; Rooney and McKenna (2007) find in wisdom the potential for a more open and balanced form of leadership; Weick (2004) and Weick and Putnam (2006) bring a notion of ‘mindful attentiveness’ to bear upon otherwise brittle and unreactive management systems; Kessler and Bailey (2007) are adamant that it is through wisdom rather than knowledge that ethics can become a governing concern of corporate life; Chia and Holt (2007) argue that it is that the pursuit of wisdom as a form of ‘learned ignorance’ that can often-times indirectly lead to performative excellence in the world of practical affairs; and finally, Nonaka (Nonaka et al., 2008; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011; Nonaka and Toyama, 2007) finds in wisdom a way of showing what is good, collectively, about an organization and its productive powers and argues persuasively why it is that wise leaders are able to do what is good for their companies and for society by understanding the higher moral purpose of what they do while remaining grounded in everyday detail. A 2013 issue of *Academy of Management Learning and Education* has also been dedicated to how wisdom might be inculcated or learnt, notably as a subject of pedagogy. There is, then, emerging interest in wisdom, a sense of its being somehow timely.

Many of these studies have drawn from the works of Aristotle and, like Aristotle, associated wisdom with *phronesis* (Aristotle (1984) ‘Nicomachean ethics’ (hereafter NE), 1142a25, 1143b8), the kind of prudential judgement by which equivocal circumstances are negotiated with both individual and collective good in mind. In Aristotle’s framework, *phronesis* is a practical rather than metaphysical property, and it takes its cue from everyday experiences rather than from eternal verities. It is not a concern with inviolable truths, but rather more with a self-cultivating form of action (Dunne, 1993: 244–246), with perfecting self and performing well whatever it is that we do. It is, therefore, something tacit and dispositional, something which cannot be defined or contained by explicit standards or rules. Practical wisdom always spills over into a dispositional sensitivity to the unfolding effects and affects of any situation, and how it relates to what is right and wrong, good or bad. *Phronesis* is a form of ‘negative capacity’ (Keats, 1817/2002) that enables us to cope with the ambiguous or the not yet formed; it is as much about restraint, or what is NOT done, as it is what is done. It is a deliberative skill that finds expression between reflection/contemplation on the one side and action on the other (NE, 1140b5). *Phronesis* does not require explicit rational articulation, indeed resists it, because reason can stymie the capacity for deliberation since rational understanding is only ever a retrospective assessment of what has occurred rather than a pure or direct form of perceiving from within a particular set of social circumstance (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005). To reason is to remove oneself dispositionally from the situation encountered, and, increasingly, to invoke established rules as known standards, or yardsticks to guide comprehension. In contrast, deliberation arises from an intimate ‘indwelling’ or of being in amidst and embedded in a complex of social relations, a persistent and pressing entwinement in situations from which a form of direct and complete perception is made available, without any need for reason or justification from above. It uses a perceptual rather than conceptual repertoire (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005).

Technê and *phronesis*

Regarding practical wisdom we shall get at the truth by considering who are the people we credit with it. (Aristotle, NE, 1140a25)

phronesis cannot be ... *technê* because action and making are different kinds of things. (Aristotle, NE, 1140b4)

We begin to get a sense of the distinction that exists between *phronesis* and knowledge, especially technical knowledge or *technê*, by recourse to the writings of Aristotle and by subsequent more

contemporary commentators (Dunne, 1993; Eikeland, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Nussbaum, 1986). For them, both *technê*, and *phronesis* are productive in the sense that unlike *episteme*, which is uninvolved knowledge of the absolute, both *technê*, and *phronesis* have real world effects and consequences. Both are expressions of practical engagement that presume mutability (since standards and rules twist and morph with changing events), specificity (since any deliberation of right and wrong retains the characteristic of the situation in which it is being expressed) and openness (definitions vary across contexts of use; see Nussbaum, 1986: 89). Although *episteme* is assumed by Aristotle to be the higher form of knowledge, it is cold, bloodless and once known there is nothing more to add to it. On the other hand, both *phronesis* and *technê*, are potentially productive; they implicate human activity in their form. Hence, we find practice in the form of making (*poiesis*) which results from the exercise of technical skill (*technê*,), and in the form of acting (*praxis*) which results from the exercise of practical wisdom (*phronesis*; Dunne, 1993: 244–247).

Unlike *technê*, however, *phronesis* ‘is a virtue and not an art’ (NE, 1140b24). While *technê* is a craft skill employed to produce an artefact that once completed is identifiable and separable from the producer, *phronesis* produces no such tangible output. Whereas the quality of output produced by *technê* can be evaluated without reference to its producer, a *phronetic* act ‘can never be identified as such without reference to the tendencies and dispositions of the agent who performs it’ (Dunne, 1993: 247). *Phronesis* expresses the kind of person one *is* not the kind of knowledge one *has* (NE, 1140b: 20–25). It manifests itself ‘only in situations that draw the self into action’ (Dunne, 1996: 268). As Eikeland (2008) puts it most succinctly, ‘*Poiêsis Makes Things, Praxis Makes Perfect*’ (p. 122). Unlike *poiesis*, which simply ends with the making of a tangible product, ‘*Praxis* has to do with the conduct of one’s life... it is activity whose end is realised in the very doing of the activity itself’, (Dunne, 1993: 244). In a modern commercial context that is preoccupied with the immediate tangibility of outcomes, the emphasis on proficiency, efficiency and material consequence finds *technê*, the predominating form of such productive knowledge; emphasis is on the tool-using capacity to make things by shaping them according to our designs and desires. What is produced lives beyond the producer, and the producer is the efficient cause of the productive action that results from *technê*, .

To use a practical illustration from Nonaka et al. (2008) relating to car manufacturing, *technê*, entails the ‘knowledge of how to make a car well’, while *phronesis* is the cultivated disposition towards excellence and self-perfection that enables us to ‘know’ what ‘a “good” car is ... and how to build such a car’ (p. 54). Such a deep understanding of what constitutes an ultimate ‘good’ and how to act towards it is what differentiates a *phronimos* (someone showing *phronesis*) from a technically proficient craftsman. This distinction is reinforced by Aristotle’s observation that ‘Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom ... because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general’ (NE, 1140b5–10). Nonaka et al. (2008) insist that any car company cannot merely survive on *technê*, alone because no matter how well made the car is the ‘effort is meaningless’ if it is not directed towards an ultimate good for producer, consumer, environment and society at large. For them, *phronesis* is the ‘ability to understand and bring to fruition that which is considered good by individual customers in specific times and situations’ (Nonaka and Toyama, 2007: 378). Moreover, *episteme* cannot answer the question of what a ‘good’ car is since good is a subjective value sanctioned by a particular collectivity. Only *phronesis* is able to synthesize ‘knowing why’ with ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing what’ (Nonaka et al., 2008: 54) in order to facilitate the realization of this collective common good. What exactly is *phronesis*, then, in the context of a knowledge-creating company? Building on Nonaka and Toyama (2007) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (2011) it consists of six abilities: (a) the ability to make a judgment on ‘goodness’, (b) the ability to perceive reality as it is, (c) the ability to create *ba* (i.e. a shared context for emerging relationships, which provide a platform for advancing individual and collective knowledge),

(d) the ability to articulate the essence into a narrative, (e) the ability to exercise political power to realize the narrative and (f) the ability to foster *phronesis* in others to build a resilient organization. These qualities are what makes for a ‘wise leader’ (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011: 61). Yet, for all these laudable attempts to express this indefinable ‘subjective’ quality of what it means to be wise, the intractable question of how to judge ‘goodness’ remains an enigma for many.

Perhaps this is where *phronesis* has lost out for the most part in a world that is increasingly technically and instrumentally driven and motivated by the relentless pursuit for individual self-gain, since it deals with that elusive and thorny aspect of productive life concerned with what it means to lead a good life; it is easier to concern oneself with getting things than to consider why having them contributes to the good life. To act with sensitivity, evaluating what to ignore or let go of, and what to pursue and nurture, is to consider what is conducive to the flourishing of oneself and others, for which of course there is no easy definitive answer. The often frustrating and apparently futile experience of trying to configure ‘the good life’ has led to a diversion of attention towards more pragmatic and productive considerations. Better and perhaps even more momentarily satisfying is to just try and keep producing more and more, more efficiently. At some juncture, however, concern with what such productiveness amounts to for human wealth must be broached. Unchecked and ill-considered, as the financial crisis shows, the obsession with producing and utilizing machines can have debilitating human consequences, as the Chuang Tzu comments, ‘where there are machines, there are bound to be machine worries; where there are machine worries, there are bound to be machine hearts’ (*The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Watson, 1968: 134). An unintended consequence of the obsession to calculate and produce with increasing mechanical efficiency at the expense of other less measurable considerations is the unwitting cultivation of an automaton-like mentality.

Practical wisdom in organization and management

The practical wisdom of employees ... will never reach the manager who is convinced that his position puts him above the need to listen to other’s opinion and advice. (Konusuke Matsushita (1978/1986), *My Management Philosophy*, p. 64)

The critical distinction, therefore, is that where *technê*, is transitive and can be ascribed to action as a qualifier, a characteristic of excellence, *phronesis* is excellence itself in action *per se*; it is what makes for a good life. *Phronesis* is as *phronimos* does, and what matters is less the outcome than the spirit in which it is done. Unlike in the application of *technê*, in *phronetic* action, where there is often ethical import, a voluntary mistake is considered ‘worse than an involuntary mistake’. This is because unlike the latter which merely relates to technical competence, the former implies ‘a premeditated injustice’, and this is much ‘worse than doing the same “not-on-purpose”’ (Eikeland, 2008: 63) since it implies a disingenuous acting *out-of-character*. One equipped with *phronesis*, on the other hand, possesses a habituated disposition that has ‘developed an “eye” ... or a “nose” for what is salient in concrete situations’ (Dunne, 1993: 368), thereby enabling the practitioner to ‘see aright’ (NE, 1143b13) and to act in the interest of the greater good.

Yet, any concern with the good life as such cannot find definitive ends against which to assess the cogency of the claim to live the good life. To make a chair well, for example, with skilled *technê*, is to imbibe rules, to work beyond them even, listening to how the wood talks back, how it gives its grain, and from such appreciate its strength and colour and how it works or otherwise with human use. It can be assessed in use, in how the chair looks, gives itself to repeated function and so on. *Phronesis* can have no appeal to an equivalent set of specific interests and criteria;

indeed, its concern is with the structuring of our lives in which the discovery of what is right is itself the process of discovery (NE, 1103a25). There is no straightforward way of saying that this action is *phronetic*, and this one not, outside of the action itself, and the action itself is only appreciated as *phronetic* insofar as it lies between other actions deemed excessive, on the one hand, and paltry or mean on the other, and the mean is not a measure, or calculation, but a judgment delivered during the action rather than through any prior or retrospective assessment of right and wrong (see Dreyfus, 2006; McNeill, 1999; Putnam, 2003: 401). Right and wrong, good and bad are often judgements made only after the fact (see Ronney and McKenna 2007 for discussion of implications of this in organizational settings). *Phronesis*, on the other hand, is wholly contained within acts themselves; it is non-transitive, non-causal (it occurs and is at one and the same time) and practical. Being a condition of acting there are no enduring ‘external’ standards, no generalized conditions to use for comparison, and no consistent concepts to fix meanings. *Phronesis* is developed from being immersed within events, requires exponents work through and beyond them, learning a suppleness of mind and body by which what is salient for flourishing is brought to the fore.

Such a mental suppleness associated with being empirically immersed is very much reminiscent of what the Japanese industrialist Konosuke Matsushita (1978/1986: 63–65) calls a *sunao* mind. The Japanese term *sunao*, properly translated, means simplicity, humility and docility in the face of truth; it is a kind of disciplined objectivity born of an ‘untrapped mind’ that ‘looks at things as they are at that moment and colours them with no special bias, emotionalism, or preconception ... He is open to experience them as they are’. Matsushita (2002) maintains that Matsushita Electric has made it a key priority to cultivate this *sunao* mind among all its personnel ‘in the conviction that it enables us to perceive the real state of all things in society’ (p. 45) so that ‘strong, upright and wise’ actions can be taken accordingly. Yet, being immersed in situation-specific circumstances and responding accordingly without any pre-established ‘guiding standards’ to aid proper action and decision is inevitably counterintuitive; it finds the traditional practices of management somewhat awash – the presumptions of certainty, control and expertise tied to the idea of knowledge equating them to a right or best way have to be loosened. This behoves management as a practice to embrace the improvised and incomplete as readily as it already does the planned and fully formed (Beavn and Thompson, 2013; Kavanagh, 2013; Malan and Kriger, 1998; Rowley, 2006, Zackariasson and Styhre, 2006).

In the immediacy of this response to an entire concrete situation, there is submissiveness, a bending to the demands and expectations of lived life and thereby getting to know one’s way about through belonging, a capacity to be affected by situations without resenting surprise or lamenting loss. Where *technê*, might urge us to look for patterns in our experience from which we can distil practical rules whose generality can allow us to erect bulwarks and gangways by which we coral and negotiate the vicissitudes of life, or to look for equivalences among things we desire, *phronesis* teaches us to be sceptical of such a demand for the universal and commensurable (Nussbaum, 1986: 298–299). Practical wisdom stays with the indwelt experience of making good judgments that are, by necessity, situation-specific. The wise are those who are reticent when they encounter calls for universal prescription, and are instead imaginative when called upon to deal with inevitably indeterminate situations that will always require empirical sensitivity and some form of improvisation. The codes and rules being invoked (say by regulators looking to control financial trading) are often unable to cope with the everyday subtleties and habits evoked in business decisions, whose cogency rested entirely with a situated sensitivity rather than formal compliance (Nyberg, 2008). Rules and maxims can only ever function as rules of thumb, suggestions that help anchor resourcefulness awhile, but not guiding reasons, which can only ever exist in a realm of logic, rather than action (Dreyfus, 2006). Without guiding rules to invoke (external yardsticks)

therefore, the grounding and consistency by which wisdom is attained is intimately wrapped up with one's character (Dunne, 1993: 266–268); a sense of the good life having been worked at through life, internalized through involvement, so it becomes an attitude and orientation, not just an opinion (NE, 1142b: 10). Character means the wise are not feckless, there is a self-reliant reaching back into a constancy of character from which commitment to a sense of the good life and to flourishing their striving and resourcefulness carry both legitimacy and passion (NE, 1144a: 5). It is through involvement that we experience how character, learning and competence are woven into an evolving, intuitive capacity to experience situations competently, expertly, by letting these situations and others that are involved talk back.

This 'letting back in' of others shows the collective nature of *phronesis*, what Arendt (1961/2006: 216–220) finds to be what distinguishes practical from philosophical wisdom. *Phronesis* is rooted in and extends toward a political ability to acknowledge and take account of others implicated in any situation, whether they are present or absent. A similar point is made by Nonaka and Takeuchi (2011) when they say 'wise leaders exercise political judgment by understanding the viewpoints and emotions of others, gleaned through everyday verbal and nonverbal communication' (p. 65). Similarly, when Nonaka and Toyama (2007) refer to strategic management as a form of 'distributed practical wisdom', a collective practice to 'pursue common goodness', they allude to a collective sensitivity realized by acting in a world-shared-with-others (p. 371). *Phronesis* is bound by a sense that 'discloses the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world' (Arendt, 1961/2006: 221). To appreciate others is to be deliberative in some way, to be sympathetic and to experience a kind of 'fellow-feeling', to revisit Adam Smith's term, such that the existing habits and prejudices (the complete environment through which we imagine and arrange ourselves, as selves, and others as others) and our sense of identification with others (the disappointments and joys of association) are enlivened with prudential awareness that we act without full awareness of possible effects, and that the views of those we might affect count as much as our own (McCloskey, 2008; Raphael, 2008: 128).

Küpers and Statler (2008) show the resonance of nurturing such public sympathy through events of leadership, notably understanding how the activity of making judgments is a relational achievement that is inevitably distributed and dispersed as organization, rather than being held by a single individual or group atop an organization. Similarly, in studying entrepreneurship, Johannisson (2011) calls this *phronetic* common sense an awareness of organizing context by which apparently isolated figures like entrepreneurs are able to make sense of their venture. *Phronesis* is not knowledge of techniques or technologies, nor is it an individual trait – rather it emerges in experiencing habits (and anomalies in such) in an engaged, almost super-empirical way, from which exposure to traditions and habits, and the felt frustrations associated with such, comes the possibility of taking (*prendre*) something new, but always from within (*entre*; Hjorth and Steyaert, 2004) a given situation. By emphasizing the collective aspect, Johannisson (2011) widens the criteria by which such entrepreneurial endeavour is deemed valuable – the venture can be playful, caring, un-economic even and still be considered 'good' according to the demands of the concrete situation in which the entrepreneur is continuing to learn about, and enlist, an organizing context.

The ascent from the abstract to the concrete (to paraphrase Illyenkov) being induced by *phronesis* has implications for research practice too. The social sciences are not good at predicting events, nor verifying results, nor even agreeing on the basic grounding of phenomena of interest. This is all well known. Vickers (1970: 25) suggests rather than continue to struggle with realizing the status of science, it is better to drop assumptions that information in human systems is an especially complex form of energy transfer across discrete matter in a manner analogous to that of the physical sciences. This is something echoed by Ghoshal (2005) in his concern at the baleful effects of the 'scientific' forms of knowledge regularly peddled in business schools. Instead, Vickers

suggests investigations of social phenomena examine the continued, open-ended interaction of signals and interpretive systems from and into which they are cast. The upshot are studies that attend to the inherent mobility of social phenomena, aware of the sheer lack of persistent identity and hence the hubris of wanting to control and to fix human life. Flyvbjerg (2001: 55) suggests *phronesis* as an apt term to evoke this more contingent and contextual understanding that has two related aspects making it distinct from either *episteme* or *technê*. First, awareness of the interests and problems experienced by others through sustained involvement with their lives. From such involvement comes sympathy, a capacity to appreciate what matters and why in situations as they unfold. Second, through sympathy, comes useful knowledge by which research might realize desirable change. Thus, *phronetic* social science evaluates situations and elicits commitment; the social scientist becomes political, sensitive to the mechanisms of control by which certain bodies of knowledge gain precedence over others, for good or ill. For Flyvbjerg (2001: 130–134), *phronetic* researchers ask four forms of question: What is happening and where is it headed? Who gains and loses from these trends? Are they desirable? What should be done? In doing so, researchers abandon the sense of a foundational paradigm; they are no longer tethered by a common method nor assessed on their capacity to produce testable generalizations but rather appreciated for their concern for improving life. Such an examination of human lives and their prospects has to take place within those lives, forcing social inquiry into contexts. Observations become perspectives, method a tactical occupation of situations and truth akin to mobile knowledge claims that make temporal rather than universal sense. To inquire after human lives is in some way to be part of them by conversing with those being studied and presenting findings publicly and recursively. In this regard, the papers associated with this Special Issue express, in a myriad of ways, the recursive and conversational nature of their inquiry into Wisdom and Learning in relation to Organization and Management.

Papers in this Special Issue

We have spent some time grounding wisdom, to situate the papers in this Special Issue, none of which explicate wisdom so much as show instances of its expression. Shotter and Tsoukas (2014) find wisdom unfolding in a performance of re-orientation; it is experienced as a response to shock. To be wise is to be able somehow to cope with a situation that is bewildering, or uncertain in ways that allows us to come to some kind of judgment, not only about the nature of the experience but how to respond. Wisdom is not at all like fact here. There is no content as such, nothing that can be understood generally. Instead, they talk about being alive to one's situation as both a landscape of restraint and possibility. Typically, situations simply are, they are not thought about as such, but when things breakdown – machines go awry, behaviour is ill-mannered, force majeure intervenes or as in Shotter and Tsoukas' empirical case of medical malpractice – laws and ethical protocols are broken – the situation in which one finds oneself comes alive, animated by puzzling forces demanding they be acknowledged. No longer can we rely on habit, nor can we refer to a ready-to-hand manual of how to behave and apply it mechanically. The situation calls for wisdom, which we exercise through judgment. To judge is to absorb a situation in two mutually re-enforcing ways. First, a moment of suspension during which one becomes sensitive to the often multiple and competing forces flowing through such disruptive events, remaining alive to different perspectives, avoiding knee jerk reactions and listening to a situation from within. Second, making a stand, or acting, in a way that transforms the situation into an event with focus. This coming into focus is not cognitive, but a practical performance that allows the exponent of wisdom to 'go on' from within a set of norms, material conditions and personal feelings into which one finds oneself thrown. The difficulty is not a technical one of organizing the intellect, but what Shotter and Tsoukas (2014) call

ones of orientating the will. Here, they are working firmly with the legacy of Wittgenstein for whom knowledge and the claims of knowledge served, somewhat ironically, to be sources of profound confusion.

There is also in Shotter and Tsoukas' (2014) example a sense of the emotional resonance of wisdom. Wittgenstein also picks this up, the interlarding of knowledge and feeling, belief and commitment. *Phronesis* carries emotional resonance. There is vulnerability here too, as feelings of anxiety, envy, joy, grief, boredom, disappointment, disgust, remorse, delight and love carry us into situations without us being at all in control or fixed. These emotions are akin to fate, drives and feelings that resist choice, but they remain personally and collectively felt, they belong to us, presenting us with an ordinary angst of having to act in ways that enhance what we care about while absorbing the imperfection, loss and desire we feel in an undependable world (Nussbaum, 1990: 388). Investigating such studies move towards stories, or even myth, as advocacy of this fine-grained awareness disrupts wisdom itself; advocacy of an attitude to life that strives toward a dynamic sufficiency of attainment cannot itself be immune from contestation. McKay and Zundel (2014) use such in their exposing of the ancient Greek term *metis*, or cunning, something we might regard as the underbelly of *phronesis*, describing or evoking as it does the extending and twisting of situational sensitivity using fertile but sometimes dubious techniques. If *phronesis* is prudence, an almost quiescent capacity to give oneself over to the demands of the situation by which sensitivity human interests might be better served, then *metis* is the cunning by which a situation might yield immediate and often personal advantage. *Metis* is productive, practical, without formal standards and resistant to articulation, it arises dispositionally, a skill at reading situations for what they might throw up, but it is less a craft and more being crafty.

McKay and Zundel (2014) show how *metis* extends our awareness of the potential of wisdom, or stretches might be a better term; *phronesis* is twisted, made to suffer even, and we experience how as prudence gives way to cunning an appreciation of a situation can become mischievous and even joyful on the one hand a devious and seditious on the other. There is a style to wisdom, a *hexis* by which attentiveness comes to have a feel for things, literally, such that the mind and body become one extending process of involved responsiveness, a fluency of movement by which care for the good is less a removed deliberation than it is a being placed in readiness, alive to the possibilities projected from the situations into which they are thrown. These possibilities are like signposts, they suggest directions, and can be read and followed because of a dispositional character that has followed such before, acquired the habit of such, and moreover has been able to deliberate as to how these do or do not avail towards human flourishing. Wisdom is not contained within a head, or body even, but spills over into the world itself as one's attentiveness is being educated continually by that world (Ingold, 1996).

Statler (2014) discusses how being educated in wisdom remains almost an oxymoron, something that belies its own conceits – to be wise is precisely to resist the instruction of experts. It is about being in amid things, cultivating character, deliberating on experience in ways that might be exemplified and shown, but never condensed into formal rules and standards. Wisdom leads to a sense that applied knowledge is all there is – an object is always and only ever an object of experience, and awareness of the object emerges from its mattering in some way, its having consequence (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Wisdom also complicates our typical sense of 'being applied' or 'mattering to', because the fluency of belonging, the complicity with situations, finds the assumed distinction between perceiver and perceived, between knowledge and its application, untenable. As Statler (2014) suggests, dualisms start to just slip, and we end up with active experience, an expressive condition of finding ways through life, more or less skilfully. We can pull away in deliberation, but pull too much, and we arrive at smooth abstract surfaces (laws, models, equivalences) whose life depends on not being troubled or disturbed by experience, then run almost *sui generis*. Wisdom

gets us back in touch with the concrete, making us aware, like William James (1902/1922), of the seductions and yet emptiness of ideal objects:

What we think of might be enormous – the cosmic times and spaces for example – whereas the inner state may be the most fugitive and paltry activity of the mind. Yet the cosmic objects, so far as the experience yields them, are but ideal pictures of something whose existence we do not inwardly possess but only point at outwardly, while the inner state is our very experience itself; its reality and that of our experience are one. A conscious field plus its object as felt or thought of, plus an attitude towards the object plus the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs – such a concrete bit of personal experience may be a small bit, but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow, not a mere abstract element of experience, such as the ‘object’ is when taken all alone. (p. 499)

Given wisdom places us back with experience like this, within our ignorance so to speak, how then to wrestle with the paradox of learning about our ignorance? Can wisdom be taught even? Statler (2014) argues it might, even translated into classrooms, yet only if it is the contingent and the particular that get aired, constantly, without reaching after explanatory models. Moreover, those teachings (and writing about teaching even) are to find themselves equally ‘thrown’, becoming sources of exemplification and provocation rather than authority.

All the articles find themselves wrestling with the elusiveness of wisdom, as we too have done in this introduction. This is not to hide behind the academic play of words, but to admit that language does indeed stop sometimes, and here it is often at its most arresting. We hope the articles here show this.

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On page 374, reference citations for McKay and Zundel (2014) should read Mackay, Zundel and Alkirwi (2014).