Should We Teach Students to Theorize? Classical Greek Philosophy and the Learning Journey

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In ancient Greece, philosophy was understood as a way of life, a way of seeing and being in the world, rather than as the abstract intellectual discipline with which the term is typically associated today. For example, Aristotle considered the practice of philosophy as a training to assist in evaluating whether one's actions were good, which was determined in relation to the proper goal or purpose (*telos*) of human existence. That purpose was happiness (*eudaimonia*), which was understood not in the modern sense of pleasurable feeling but in terms of completeness or perfection. This is not entirely unrelated to a more pragmatic understanding of the purpose of Business Schools, the preparation of students for work, in that it requires attention to right action. However, the questions that might be asked will not be the same because the starting point, the processes of learning, and the outcomes all will be of a very different nature.

   In this sense it is not enough to be practical; not enough to be intellectual. What is required are leaders and managers who are philosophical in the ancient sense of the term – able to engage with and to ask the deep questions of what it means to be fully human in their practice of commerce and trade as well as in their contribution to society.

Business Schools are places of learning, which always involves an inquiry into theory and practice. The description of programmes and modules typically contain learning outcomes

that state that by the end of the course students will be able 'to *apply* theories' or to 'demonstrate the capacity to *use* theories' in real situations. However, we believe that insufficient attention is given to enabling students to learn how to develop theories of their own; that is, to theorize (Weick, 1995). We have never seen a learning outcome that requires 'the ability to theorize'. This is important because Business Schools should be expected to prepare students for something more than the 'application of theory'. Some argue that this 'something' is employability, a preparation for work, while others call for the development of more responsible citizens. However, we are more sympathetic to Berry's discussion of 'The Loss of the University':

> what universities, at least the public-supported ones, are mandated to make or to help to make is human beings in the fullest sense of those words — not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens but responsible heirs and members of human culture… Underlying the idea of a university — the bringing together, the combining into one, of all the disciplines — is the idea that good work and good citizenship are the inevitable by-products of the making of a good — that is, a fully developed — human being. (1987: 77)

This view of a university education can be traced back to the Academies in ancient Greece, the home of the philosophers. The first academy is generally considered to have been Plato's, founded in the *gymnasium* in Athens*,* where people would also exercise the body – suggesting, perhaps, a particular nuance to Berry's notion of the 'fully developed human being'. Synagogues, mosques, monasteries, libraries and later, universities took over the role of academies as places to exercise the mind and to engage with the deeper questions of being human. The purposes of such institutions were not limited to providing a 'preparation for work', 'the civic standard', or mere 'intellectual competence', but had more rounded and expansive intentions. Moreover, we suggest that central to this intention was the development of the capacity to theorize.

In Greek society prior to the time of Plato there was a particular type of journey or pilgrimage to a religious festival or oracle made on behalf of the community. Relevant to our discussion of *theorizing* this pilgrim was known as the *theoros*, spectator of the divine. The whole journey had its focus on *theoria* – the contemplation of the event or object often through participation in a sacred ritual. The *theoros* would return and recount the story of the journey in order to transmit to the community what had been seen. Plato and others took up this image of the *theoros* as a metaphor for the philosopher.

In this chapter we reflect on theorizing using Plato's allegory of the Cave as a mythical representation of the journey to see the *eidos*, the Forms or Ideas, which Plato considered the most fundamental reality. The philosopher-as-*theoros* was not taught theories to apply but, by undertaking the philosophical journey, contemplated reality directly and then theorized the experience. We use this image as a metaphor for teaching Business School students to theorize – here we imagine the student-as-*theoros*.

The modern notion of theory has lost touch with its linguistic roots in *theoria,* contemplation of the divine spectacle (for an extended treatment of this argument see Case et al., 2012). As a practice of contemplation the philosophical journey gives attention to what is 'seen'. Theorizing involves constructing a way of seeing things. The questions we ask in Business Schools typically actively exclude aspects of this contemplative vision. We will explore why this is the case in greater depth below. We are interested, however, in what happens to the learning process if we treat the student as a *theoros*, giving attention to what is seen and experienced by the student and how this is then described – to self and other.

The process of theorizing retains the focus of the learning journey as a pursuit of *truth* or *reality*. However, to name the focus of the journey in such a way is both necessary and potentially unhelpful. Our contention is that the object of theorizing, like Plato's *eidos*, is

essentially unknowable in the sense that we, in the modern era, typically think of knowledge. It might seem that this renders our discussion pointless – what value is there in encouraging students, engaged in learning the practical disciplines of leading and managing, to pursue a 'truth' that is unknowable? However, we hope to demonstrate that valuing such truth will influence the manner in which we engage in theorizing.

Firstly, it makes clear the requirement of post-positivist inquiry that we retain a professional humility in the face of the pursuit of knowledge: it is a widely accepted principle of modern science from most epistemological positions that certain knowledge is not achievable.

Secondly – and here we are perhaps more in touch with Platonic thinking – that even though we cannot know or properly name truth or reality that does not mean that it cannot have an impact upon us. For Plato *transformation* can take place in an encounter with reality.

Thirdly, through attention to these transformations we engage in theorizing – the creation of representations of newly formed knowledge. This will be considered later in our discussion of the Platonic concept of *mimesis*.

A comparison with Czarniawska (2013: 109) is helpful. She uses a different analogy, literary invention, to explore the notion of theorizing the complexities of organizational practice and context. She suggests that such an approach does not create a fiction but rather provides a means to engage with reality by using a narrative plot to explore and make sense of experience. This 'activity of emplotting' produces theoretical knowledge that is then tested against or fitted over the experience of the narrator. It is in this sense that Corvellec (2013: 23) encourages us to consider the learning process as 'something dynamic, that is to say, an invitation to focus on theorizing rather than on theory'.

In Plato's cave we see described the gradual enlightenment that is achieved through the movement from shadowy ignorance through the journey out into the light of the Sun. This is a process of 'transformation'.

Box 13.1: Plato's cave

In Plato's allegory of the Cave, he depicts the typical human being as shackled in the darkness, believing that life consists of the shadows of unseen objects projected onto the cave wall as they pass in front of an unseen fire. The philosophical journey is represented by the story of a person who becomes free from these restraining shackles and – with some trepidation – makes a journey not merely towards the fire but also beyond, outside of the Cave and into the light of the Sun. This is a journey of enlightenment, of discovery, as things previously invisible become seen in their true light.

Ironically, but perhaps predictably, when the traveller returns to the cave and tries to explain what has been seen, the account is incomprehensible. To those satisfied with the pale representation of knowledge within the Cave, the truth is unrecognisable and, therefore, unknowable.

This allegory provides an idealized view of the philosophical journey – idealized in the sense that such a journey is beyond human capability in anything but a partial sense. The underlying meaning is that we are all in the Cave and would struggle to understand the truth even if it were revealed to us. Such philosophical practice is thus framed as fundamentally aspirational; knowledge of reality only ever partial and even then difficult to comprehend and accept.

A journey of enlightenment

Paradoxically, the initial process of transformation in the journey from Plato's Cave is represented by the *theoros* experiencing '*blindness*' (the first of two episodes). On leaving the shadowy darkness of the Cave the philosopher is blinded by the light of the Forms. This takes some time for the philosopher's 'eyes' to adjust. Of course, this is an image of the ideal philosopher and so the analogy does not describe the experience of the all-too-human student *theoros*. The latter will never fully overcome the blindness but may receive a partial vision, as it were, a flash of light, an insight. Prior to insight, however, this experience of blindness is troubling. Plato suggests that in the experience of being unshackled and coming out of the Cave '...all these actions gave him pain, and … he was too dazed to see the objects whose shadow he had been watching before' (Plato, 1971: 208, *Republic* VII 515).

This is one of the reasons that Business Schools prefer to teach 'theories' rather than encourage their students to theorize: clinging to the illusion of knowing can be a defence against the uncertain, emotional, sometimes painful, experience of encountering truth. Although being at the edge of discovery, moving to the entrance of the Cave, as it were, can be exciting and invigorating, the confusion and unsettling anxiety that also accompanies the experience often frightens us off at the very moment when we might catch a glimpse of the truth, when something new might be discovered. Increasingly the context in universities, with requirements for clearly stipulated learning outcomes, contributes to the potential terror that prevents the teacher from putting students in a position where they experience blindness: it is not acceptable to acknowledge ignorance and a lack of answers.

However, if the fear of this blindness, and the possibility that it might be permanent, can be contained then Plato's journey suggests that insight may come – and with it creativity and energy are mobilized. Through the contemplative journey there can be an unexpected

broadening of imagination when one is somehow in touch with or touched by the truth of *this* moment and context, limited and provisional though it inevitably is. This does not have to be a search for some 'grand' truth: it is enough that it is relevant to the demands of the moment. Indeed, the pursuit of some generalized notion of truth can even be a way of denying or avoiding a present situation that is uncomfortable or confusing, whereas addressing the truth of this moment can be exactly what is needed to progress one's learning.

This view of learning involves surviving the debilitating experience of ignorance before coming to see moment by moment what is *actually going on*, in contrast to what was planned for or has been experienced in the past. In order to assess the impact of events, and to adapt as necessary, the theorizing student may have to put their knowledge and familiar ways of thinking to one side, in order to allow their minds be changed. Such an approach to learning may even require the capacity to downplay what at first sight appear to be more productive and potentially profitable lines of inquiry. Ironically, it may only be by changing and re-visioning the unfolding reality as it evolves that learning can preserve a focus on what is actually seen and experienced – as opposed to previously conceived answers.

This requires an approach to learning that is based on listening and on waiting rather than on the more obvious academic modes of knowing and professing. The poet Keats called this Negative Capability, when a person is '… capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats, 1970: 43). The relevance to students of leadership and management has been recognized in recent years (Simpson et al., 2002).[1] *Theoria*, a journey into not knowing, tends to stimulate high levels of uncertainty and anxiety and is a threat to fresh thinking. As a result, there is often pressure to invoke prior

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[1] The extensive literature on cross-cultural differences and their importance for leadership (e.g. Hofstede, Trompenaars, the GLOBE study) and the psychological construct of ambiguity tolerance might also be considered.

knowledge that may no longer apply or to adopt a new certainty too quickly, before a new vision (or plot, to continue Czarniawska's literary analogy) has had the chance to evolve.

If the philosopher can overcome the anxiety of the first blindness, the journey continues out of the Cave and into the light. The philosopher now 'sees' in a new way – the vision of the *theoros* attending the spectacle and not just looking at shadows on a wall – and reality is contemplated directly. However, on returning to Plato's Cave, the philosopher is again blinded and disorientated but this time by the darkness rather than the light. Having received the light of insight, the philosopher returns home to a place that no longer looks the same – not because it has changed but because of an inner transformation. It takes time to adjust to this new understanding of reality and new sense must be made of the old. Moreover, on attempting to describe what has been seen, the cave-dwellers either fail, or do not want, to understand the philosopher's description of what has been seen. The philosopher is in danger of being marginalized as mad or politically dangerous. The student *theoros* may suffer the same fate or worse – within many educational establishments the student runs the risk of failing the assignment!

The return

Plato's allegorical return to the Cave suggests two dimensions for the student *theoros* to consider. Firstly, the challenge of managing this second experience of blindness. What had seemed so clear in the contemplative gaze of *theoria* can quickly dim and the sense of enlightenment may dissipate. The 'knowing' of the contemplative gaze on the journey, full of life and vibrancy, is of a different kind to the 'knowing' of the Cave, which we might think of as fixed and limited. This requires the emotional re-integration of insight and a re-presentation, the production of an imitation of what has been seen, within the modes of knowledge available in the academic environment. Secondly, the student *theoros* must

consider not merely the requirement to find ways to represent these insights in a manner that makes personal sense of what has been 'seen' but also to find ways to communicate this to others.

Box 13.2: Bridging the gap – an illustration

In contemporary education, it is recognized that the virtue of co-inquiring from experience was first addressed at the end of the 1960's with Schwab's (1966) work on the disconnection between teaching science and doing science. Some experiences in inquiry based learning in Business Schools have demonstrated the benefits of co-inquiring and theorizing with students. Using the idea of 'bridging' to provoke in business students their own theorizing about change, Page and Gaggiotti (2013) organized tutorials in the middle of the Clifton Suspension Bridge, Bristol:

> We wanted to avoid limiting the invitation to using the bridge as an abstract metaphor to apply to organization change, but rather to invite them to engage with their own embodied experiences of being on the bridge, and to link this to their experiences of change. (2013: 277)

Through this experience, which involved a physical journey from the university campus to the bridge, students were asked to contemplate crossing and being suspended in the middle of a gorge. What was provoked in students and staff was used to theorize the experience of change. This led to the emergence and exploration of concepts and theories of what change was – security, disparity, faith, fatalism, no-turning-back, trust… The students observed that these were ideas that were not addressed in the undergraduate literature. Another dimension of the learning experience identified and explored the experience of anxiety for students and staff. In particular, it was a challenge to hold on to the principles of student-led inquiry as an approach to learning and change. Staff members found themselves under considerable pressure from students to revert to more familiar approaches that were not experienced as

emotionally threatening and learning processes that did not involve 'pain'. The severity of not-knowing, like the experience of blindness in Plato's cave, was immensely challenging. Some students expressed their preference for more didactic approaches and keeping their focus purely on assessment and the successful completion of the modules. The textbook theories on resistance to change were inadequate to capture the emotional and intellectual reality that was found on the bridge over a chasm.

Plato chooses the metaphor of 'blindness' not merely because it can represent the experience of not knowing but also because of the emotional experience of confusion. Seen in this way, theorizing is not merely an intellectual process – it is emotional in all its aspects. Ehn and Löfgren (2013) note that this is rarely addressed in relation to theory:

> Theories are mostly regarded as an extremely intellectual business, a world of abstract and logical thinking. Academic textbooks rarely mention any emotional element in theorizing, talking about the struggles of trying to grasp a new way of thinking or defending it against others. Theories are presented, rather, as finished systems of thought or toolboxes. They are a serious matter, nothing to be taken lightly, to be joked about, or to become too personally involved in. There is not much talk about feelings such as the joy of finally understanding a concept, the security a theory may provide, or the passion that could be invested in it. (2013: 172)

We can see this represented in Plato's allegory of the journey from, and back to, the Cave: we see the fear of the unknown, the excitement, delight and wonder of enlightenment, and the confusion and frustration of returning to the shadows and seeking to communicate what has been seen. For Page and Gaggiotti's students (see Box 13.2) the trip to the gorge was emotional. In such circumstances, theorizing is the product of a range of transformations within the individual that arise from an engagement with truth – not merely in growth of mind and knowledge but also in the use of that knowledge. Plato referred to this process of transformation as *mimesis*.

Mimesis is a term that has gained some popularity in recent times following a long period of neglect (see Gaggiotti, 2012). It is also a term that is used to mean many different things – even by Plato himself, not to mention the array of modern writers. For our purposes we will consider it in its broadest definition, that of representation. For the idealized philosopher, *mimesis* as transformation is the representation of what has been seen through the contemplative gaze of *theoria*, the Form, into a form that is intelligible within the Cave, the realm not of reality but of knowledge as we typically understand it.

Plato distinguished between different levels of knowing, valuing most highly the direct engagement of the philosopher with reality through the contemplative gaze (see Gebauer and Wulf, 1995: 6). Other levels of representation are important in the learning process but do not arise directly from *theoria*. In *Protrepticus* Aristotle argues

> In the other arts and crafts men do not take their tools and their most accurate reasonings from first principles... rather, they take them at second or third hand or at a distant remove, and base their reasonings on experience. Only the philosopher enacts a mimesis of objects that are exact; for he is a spectator of things that are exact, and not of mimemata ... An imitation of what is not divine and stable in its nature cannot be immortal and stable. Clearly, stable laws and good and right actions belong to the philosopher alone among craftsmen. (B48-9)' (quoted in Nightingale, 2004: 196–7)

This relates to the second aspect of the challenge of the blindness on returning to the Cave: that the cave-dwellers do not recognize the philosopher's account of the Forms. Their world of knowledge is encapsulated in the shadows on the wall, the representations in flickering images of the objects that pass in front of the fire. Furthermore, the fire is itself a mere representation of the light of the Sun, the true source of enlightenment. Thus, the cave dweller's knowing is not of Form, reality, but of representations of representations. We see the same in relation to the theories often peddled by Business Schools, which are frequently

summaries of adaptations of interpretations of theories – and even then, typically from a different discipline (sociology, psychology, etc.). There is clearly some value in such forms of knowing but it does not have the clarity of vision that is Plato's ideal. The student *theoros* must find a way to make sense of his or her *own* vision of reality in a manner that others might appreciate – not least the tutors if this is to be included in any assessment. Making such a replication of the real is a practice of social justification (Gaggiotti, 2012).

Why is *theoria* important?

It is for many of the reasons outlined above that theorizing is insufficiently encouraged or facilitated in the learning process in Business Schools: it can be painful and demanding for the student and a similar challenge for the tutor; it is not controllable, nameable, predictable and amenable to description in a programme specification. It is not easy to audit and requires a high level of trust in the professionalism of the academic as well as moving well beyond the functionalism of a tick-box approach to criteria-based assessment processes. It requires the students to take themselves, their responsibilities, and the learning process more seriously than is generally the norm. However, if we are to produce well rounded human beings who are capable of engaging more effectively in the ethical and relational complexities of the modern organization then finding ways to develop the capacity to theorize is not an optional extra.

Business Schools often pride themselves on producing influential leaders of the future. In a recent collection of articles on the future of leadership development, Pfeffer articulates an 'agenda for change', suggesting that developing leaders has 'at least three components':

- Knowledge – to 'think smart' – 'technical skills required to help them… make better decisions, organize their enterprises more effectively, and be able to think in a scientific, critical way about strategy and business models'

- Act smart – 'being able to turn technical knowledge into action – to be able to surmount the knowing-doing gap… and actually behave in ways consistent with the theories and information that leaders possess'

- Inculcate values and standards for conduct 'that are socially beneficial and able to engage the workforce' (Pfeffer, 2011: 219)

These components accord with established wisdom in relation to the requirements of the modern corporate leader. However, they all relate to the questions that Business Schools typically ask that cluster around questions about *what we (supposedly) know*. In relation to the five ancient virtues of thought (*techne, episteme, phronesis, sophia*, and *nous*)[2] we see in Pfeffer's list some attention to the first three. However, there is a limited – values based – interpretation of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and no consideration of *nous*, the capacity required for *theoria*, contemplative knowing. Consequently we are suggesting that there are several 'components' that ought to be added to Pfeffer's list, which relate to questions about what we love, about what we lack, and about what *we do not know*. These questions cannot be answered by reference to others' theories but require the individual students to theorize for themselves.

This presents a challenge to the way that Business Schools typically operate. As we have seen, the journey of the *theoros* is an emotional one and yet educational institutions legitimate the rational. The student *theoros* is confronted by blindness, which will inevitably evoke confusion. In situations of uncertainty tutors will normally draw upon expert knowledge to tell the student the answer. However, the uncertainty of the *theoros* is of a different order: the tutor needs to be able to provide emotional containment to help the student to manage the anxiety of not knowing. The tutor needs a different range of skills and capabilities; and the institution needs systems and procedures that support a different form of

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[2] These terms do not translate easily but briefly these might be defined as, respectively, skill, teachable knowledge, practical wisdom, theoretical wisdom, and intuitive intellect.

learning. For example, learning outcomes cannot be specified tightly in advance – the student needs greater freedom to follow the path of enlightenment that reveals itself. Further, such inner transformation is a spiritual process, requiring the Business School, its staff and its procedures, to accommodate new levels and dimensions in the learning journey.

A common theme in the literature outlining the differences between leadership and management is that the former requires learning to *deal* with the unknowable – new, future, abstract, original – while management requires learning to *deal* with the knowable – old, past, concrete, non-original. Implying a favouritism that we do not share, Bennis states that 'the manager administers, the leader innovates; the manager is a copy, the leader is an original; the manager maintains, the leader develops' (Bennis, 1989: 45). To provide a contrast with this pro-leadership rhetoric, and with an element of sarcasm, Ford et al. (2008: 3) suggest the central task of the leader is an ethereal and futuristic engagement, *promising a bright new tomorrow*. Whether pro- or anti-leadership the literature constantly hints at an unknowable dimension to leadership practice that is rarely given sufficient attention. Business Schools typically have interpreted and responded to the demands of the unknowable future by creating a concrete set of 'components', like Pfeffer's list. An emphasis is placed upon what is known in an attempt, like some sleight of hand, to make the experience of the unknowable appear intelligible and predictable.

With a sophisticated nod to the purpose of 'preparing for work' there is a tendency for Business Schools to adopt a utilitarian approach to determining an appropriate curriculum for leaders. Key terms and phrases in recent decades include 'impact', 'excellence', and 'performance'. The questions associated with such terms are not irrelevant; however, they lack the depth required for a serious engagement with the challenges of the leadership practice of a fully developed human being. Terms and phrases of greater interest in relation to

unknowable aspects of leadership practice include the 'relational', 'complexity', and 'ethics' (see, for example, Cunliffe, 2009). The latter offer the potential for the development of leaders with the capability to engage with the challenges of the modern institution.

Unlike Pfeffer's focus, above, which conceives of thinking in a predominantly 'scientific' way, the ancient conception of theorizing integrates spiritual with mental and practical capacities. Importantly, it is in this sense that philosophy practiced by leaders (Case et al., 2011) can be understood as a way of life rather than as an abstract endeavour detached from the everyday demands and realities of work. We are suggesting that greater importance should be ascribed to what the leader sees and receives through the contemplative gaze and how this is then described – to self and other. This has the potential to have a fundamental impact upon the complex processes of thinking not only in the learning process but also in the leader's organization, hopefully increasing the chances of good and right actions.

Further reading

For a developed exploration of key philosophical themes in this chapter, see Hadot (1995).

To appreciate the importance of the journey of the theoros, see Nightingale (2004).

An expansive series of essays on the practice of theorizing and the nature of theory is provided in Corvellec (2013).

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