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Haridimos Tsoukas
Robert Chia
Editors

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VOLUME 32

PHILOSOPHY AND ORGANIZATION THEORY

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INTRODUCTION: WHY PHILOSOPHY MATTERS TO ORGANIZATION THEORY

Haridimos Tsoukas and Robert Chia

> The intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes. (James, 1911/1996, p. 51)

> Philosophy is the self-correction by consciousness of its own initial excess of subjectivity ... The task of philosophy is to recover the totality obscured by the selection. (Whitehead, 1929, p. 20)

The relentless demand for a better understanding of the world around us and the justification of appropriate human action has been a major motivational impulse in the growth and evolution of modern societies. The need to know what human life is about, what reality is made of and how we should live a rich and fulfilling life has been an abiding preoccupation since the dim and distant dawn of human civilization. One noticeable inexorable trend in this civilizing process has been the gradual shift from an overwhelming reliance on brute force to the cultivation of reasoned curiosity and the consequent development of knowledge as a means of meeting basic survival needs and attaining collectively desired ends. It may be that, as Aristotle famously remarked, human beings have the innate desire to know; however, the particular forms of knowledge generated have varied over time.

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The form and conception of knowledge we presently rely on to justify our actions has not always been what it is. It, too, has undergone substantial evolution and transformation over the centuries. Michel Foucault (1970), in *The Order of Things*, notes that each historical epoch brings with it a different conception of what it means to *know* and that this is itself grounded on the epoch's experience of order. Thus, Renaissance thought, for instance, relied heavily on the idea of an unending spiral of linked resemblances in both the material and symbolic worlds as its basis for knowledge. Proximity, convenience, analogy and emulation provided the organizing code for the creation of knowledge during this period, so much so that the walnut, which resembles the human brain, was believed to cure wounds of the pericranium. Similarly, signs observed in nature and human signs were believed to be inextricably intertwined so that there was nothing bizarre, for instance, about Paracelsus's claim that snakes may be repelled by chanting certain Greek words (Foucault, 1970, pp. 27–33).

This Renaissance conception of knowledge as deriving from observation of similarities and resemblances, however, was replaced by a Modern consciousness involving the breaking up and *analysis* of representations and the establishment of causal relations through the principles of identity and difference. Naming, representing, classifying and the establishment of causal relations became the key activities of a knowing mind. Knowledge took on an air of certainty so much so that it became vital to demonstrate the universality and irrefutability of their truth claims; *proof* was now needed. With this need for proof and justification came the demand for theoretical conjectures that adhered closely to the principles of objective observation, logical rigor in analysis, and transparency and accuracy in representation. Theories came to be recognized as empirically verifiable and intellectually justifiable claims regarding the nature of reality.

As Modern consciousness gradually took roots, developed and yielded results, such theoretical representations became no longer unquestioned, self-justifying starting points (Foucault, 1970, pp. 238–239). Quite the contrary. The Cartesian doubt was eventually turned to the cognizing subject too. What defines the late Modern *episteme*, in particular, is not the security of a single authoritative representation of things but a confusing proliferation of competing accounts (Foucault, 1970, p. 346); interpretation is now needed. The late Modern *episteme* ushered in a heightened awareness of a certain historical consciousness and a realization of importance and limitations of *perspective* in the apprehension of things. Our knowledge is now acknowledged to be incomplete and partial; we recognize an inevitable 'owing' in our 'kn-owing'.

Conceptual knowledge is 'forever inadequate to the fullness of reality to be known' (James, 1911/1996, p. 78). Our concepts are secondary formations 'inadequate and only ministerial ... they falsify as well as omit' (James, 1911/1996, p. 79). What we do in the act of theorizing is to '*harness up* reality in our conceptual scheme in order to drive it better' (James, 1909/1996, p. 248). This power of framing abstract concepts from the flux and flow of lived experiences is one of our most sublime human prerogatives in that our intellectual journeys into these abstractions enable us to return to the concrete with 'an increase both of vision and power' (James, 1909/1996, p. 217), provided that we do not ever forget that these theories and concepts are 'man-made extracts from the temporal flux' and allowed to become a 'tyranny that defeats the end' it was intended to serve (James, 1909/1996, pp. 218–219). It is this late modernist equation of theory with a partial perspective or 'viewpoint' that dominates our contemporary intellectual consciousness and that, thus, accounts for the proliferation of competing perspectives in the social sciences in general and in organization theory (OT) in particular.

The etymology of *theory* is revealing. As Toulmin (1982, p. 239) notes, the word *theoros* in classical Greece was mainly used to indicate the official delegate who was dispatched from the city-state to attend intercity athletic Games, especially the Olympic Games. He was not meant to take part in those games, only to observe them. Gradually *theoros* was used to refer to any spectator at the Games, official or unofficial, in contrast with a participant. Eventually, the abstract noun *theoria* acquired the meaning of spectating, in contrast to participating. With Aristotle, *theoria* came to refer to the philosopher's detached intellectual inquiry as opposed to the *praxis* of the 'man on the street' – the carpenter, the farmer, the trader (Toulmin, 1982, p. 239).

Theoretical conjectures are in effect 'organized' collections of propositional statements making claims regarding the phenomenon under investigation that renders them plausible and logically coherent to a community of inquirers. The impetus for a specific configuration of such propositional statements into a coherent whole derives from deeper, and frequently unexamined, metaphysical presuppositions regarding the nature of reality, our relation to it and the nature of knowledge thus produced. As philosopher of science Harre (1985, p. 16) notes, 'we have to choose some concepts with which to think about the world, and this amounts to devising or learning a language, and accepting a system of picturing and conceiving the structure of the world'. The world causes us to have beliefs but does not dictate the content of our beliefs (Rorty, 1989, p. 6). It is our 'system of picturing' of the world that guides the questions we raise and the explanatory forms we deem plausible.

In this way, the study of organization is inextricably dependent on the prior *organization of mentalities* and modes of thought.

For some time now, it has been recognized that, especially in the human sciences, there can be no unbiased conceptualizing of human experiences without our implicit reliance on both an existing 'observational order' in terms of the types of things we do in fact discriminate and a dominant 'conceptual order' in terms of which we do interpret (Whitehead, 1933, p. 183). For Whitehead, observational discrimination 'is not dictated by the impartial facts. It selects and it discards and what it retains is rearranged in a subjective order of prominence'. It is therefore a key task of human inquiry to urge observation and conceptualizing beyond the boundaries of their 'delusive completeness' (Whitehead, 1933, p. 184): a task that necessitates not in asking if a theory is true or false, but in 'noting its scope of useful application and its failure beyond that scope' (Whitehead, 1933, p. 257). Theories are tools for interrogating reality and for deriving their practical imports. They are not irrefutable truth claims. As such, it becomes incumbent on scholars of all stripes and persuasion to open themselves to the possibility of alternative, plausible theoretical viewpoints and to engage in a robust critical consideration of the competing perspectives on offer in their own specific field of study.

Yet, there is much evidence to suggest that this intellectual openness does not always characterize the world of academia, as particular types of knowledge become accepted as legitimate and are institutionalized. Academic institutions, after all, function as all institutions do: they provide closure to meaning, privileging particular ways of observing, thinking and arguing, and build particular reward systems around them. In that respect, it is only too easy to be seduced by a favourite theory and to dogmatically cling on to that which we are familiar and comfortable with. This is a condition that William James was at pains to warn us of. He notes that a misunderstanding of the status of theories and concepts often led to the denial of the very properties that sensibly presented themselves to us, which the theories were intended to capture, because we remain overly enamoured by the elegance and apparent completeness of the theory itself (James, 1909/1996, pp. 218–219).

This tendency to cling on to our own preferred views and to dismiss theories that do not conform to our own operating premises and hence to avoid sustained critical questioning of our own assumptions is widespread in the human sciences. Indeed, it has, at times, led to blatant ridiculing or offhand dismissal by the academic doyens of the establishment. One example of the hostility to provocative plausible accounts that comes

to mind was the intense reaction to the controversial work of the political philosopher Bloom (1987) in *The Closing of the American Mind*, when he forcefully argued that modern higher education, in particular, has essentially failed democracy and impoverished the souls of its students.

For Bloom the unthinking promulgation of an uncritical relativism has threatened to overwhelm Western democracies and to paradoxically propagate an 'openness to closedness' through its refusal to countenance the provision of an intellectual space for the airing of deeply entrenched prejudices. It is in fact an openness that denies the special claim of reason, an openness of 'indifference' that obscures awareness of a deeper, more abiding level of ignorance. He points out that, while it took a lifetime of unceasing intellectual labour for Socrates to come to the realization that he was ignorant, 'Now every high school student knows that. How did it become so easy?' (Bloom, 1987, pp. 40–43). Ignorance is now no longer construed as an acute and abiding awareness of the existence of a background 'unthought' that circumscribes the thinkable, but a mere 'gap' in our knowledge. Socrates, on the other hand, was acutely aware of what he did not know and hence always open to the possibility of *otherness*.

Literary critic Johnson echoed this deeper insight on the importance of the 'unthought' when she wrote most passionately: 'Ignorance, far more than knowledge, is what can never be taken for granted. If I perceive my ignorance as a gap in knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance' (1989, p. 16). In other words, it is only when we become painfully aware that it is *ignorance of our ignorance*, and not simply a gap in knowledge that prevents deep insights into the human condition, we begin to glimpse that illusive realm of complex thinking that characterizes Socratic ignorance. To heighten our awareness of this ignorance of ignorance, Bloom argues forcefully for a return to the Socratic style of learning in which the persistent questioning of conventional wisdom in pursuit of deeper insights becomes a dominant feature of academic life. Bloom cites de Tocqueville as showing that the greatest democratic danger is not so much the threat of novel radical perspectives but 'enslavement to public opinion' because of a refusal to openly engage with subjectivities and prejudices.

There is, as the German philosopher Hans George Gadamer remarked, an enduring modern intolerance or 'prejudice against prejudice'. Prejudice and subjectivity are inevitably infused into our understanding and comprehension of life and, as Whitehead points out, it is precisely the task of

philosophical inquiry to engage in the relentless self-correcting of our own initial 'excess of subjectivity'. In other words, it is only by allowing the airing of our deeply entrenched subjective prejudices and critically engaging with them that we can then begin to 'recover the totality obscured by the selection' (Whitehead, 1929, p. 20). True insight and understanding are only achieved not by avoiding contrary or vastly alien viewpoints, but by confronting them through careful scrutiny for internal paradigmatic coherence and exploring their consequent implications for the world of practical affairs. This is the true task of philosophical inquiry and a task that sets the parameters for this volume.

The need for creating a deeper awareness of the 'unconscious metaphysics' underpinning our theorizing efforts is particularly acute in OT. Our awareness that such philosophical presuppositions invariably underpin OT was irreversibly heightened more than 30 years ago by the seminal contribution of Burrell and Morgan (1979), in their influential *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*. Burrell and Morgan undertook a significant effort at uncovering the underlying theoretical underpinnings of various competing perspectives on the nature of organizational functioning. According to them, all theories of organization are based on an underlying philosophy and an implicit theory of society so that, as social scientists, organization theorists inevitably make implicit ontological assumptions regarding the nature of reality they are investigating, epistemological assumptions about how we can know with some degree of certainty about that reality and assumptions about whether the social world being investigated is ultimately orderly/regulated or conflictful/changeful in nature.

From the resultant set of competing assumptions, Burrell and Morgan developed their typology, consisting of four alternative paradigms for organizational analysis: functionalism, interpretivism, radical structuralism and radical humanism. Burrell and Morgan's efforts have led the way towards meta-theorizing in OT and to the crucial realization that theories of organization are themselves legitimate objects of analysis in our efforts to understand the phenomenon of organization. As Tsoukas and Knudsen (2003) remarked, when we raise meta-theoretical questions, we begin our journey towards greater reflexive awareness. We begin to realize that our culture, our race, our ideology, our gender, our class, our language and our authority structures (and we might add, our epoch) dramatically affect the validity of our knowledge claims. Exposure to alternative accounts of organizational functioning forces us to reflect on the partiality and inevitable incompleteness of our knowledge claims. They sensitize us to

the possibility of a realm of tacit knowing and practical understanding that resists logic, linguistic formulation and theoretical explication.

If philosophy helps make us self-aware of critical assumptions we tacitly incorporate in our organizational theorizing, how does it happen? What types of philosophical inquiry are conducive to our refining our research practice as organization theorists? There are three ways in which philosophical reflection may find its way to organizational research: ontological, epistemological and praxeological (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 5; Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2005, p. 363). We examine each one as follows:

1. *Ontology*: Every scientific discipline takes for granted certain key categories, which define the nature of its subject matter and frame its inquiries. The critical questions here are: 'What are the phenomena we investigate made of? What are their salient properties?' Or to put it more philosophically, 'What is the Being of the entities that constitute the object of inquiry?' (Guignon, 1983, p. 64). Without a tacit understanding of foundational categories that are thought to be constitutive of the salient properties of the object of study, the practice of conducting scientific research cannot even begin. The theoretical frameworks organization theorists develop reflect deep ontological commitments about the nature of reality. By ontologically carving up the world in particular ways, researchers bring out the constitutive elements of the phenomena they explore. Important advances in the social sciences at large, and in OT in particular, come from making fresh ontological distinctions that enable social scientists to approach a particular phenomenon in a new light and, accordingly, design new research programmes. There are numerous such examples in OT. We examine a few below.

One of the most important ontological distinctions made in OT is Weick's (1979, 1995) redirecting of attention from organizations to *organizing*. Focusing on organizing, Weick has argued that organizations are not ready-made entities with predefined properties waiting to be discovered by the researcher, as, for example, the famous Aston studies had assumed (Pugh, 1981), but systems of interaction that *become* organized. What we label and experience as 'organizations' (notice the quotes) are products of human action. Researchers' task, therefore, is to explain *how* organization (notice the singular) emerges, to investigate the processes through which collections of individuals are transformed into organized entities and ascribed a singular identity. Accordingly, if 'organization' is an emergent phenomenon, so is,

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