

On Wittgenstein and Management at Rest: Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Problems

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This essay proposes that management is too often seen as problem solving, and that the equally important art of ignoring problems has not received enough attention. With reference to the thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the essay argues for letting go, and attempting to leave thoughts at rest.

It is one of the chief skills of the philosopher not to occupy himself with questions which do not concern him.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The real discovery is the one which enables me to stop doing philosophy when I want to. The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Whereas the ideas of more fashionable philosophers such as Nietzsche and Deleuze have been frequently applied to management problems, the same cannot be said of the curious thinker known as Ludwig Wittgenstein. Often mentioned as a strong candidate for the title of 'greatest philosopher of the 20th century', he recast the field in a highly original way, and his potential for offering insights into management has barely been touched upon. A particular aspect of the philosophy of Wittgenstein¹ that has not received the attention it deserves, specifically in the field of management and organisation studies, is the notion of philosophy as therapy. More to the point, there is a note, a thread, to the thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein that emphasises an endstate that might best be described by the phrase '[t]houghts that are at peace',² referring to the way in which he wanted to turn away from the idea that philosophical problems required deep thought, and instead develop an approach where the work of philosophy was to dissolve and end our entrancement with what he viewed as false problems. Once we could see past the problems created by overcomplicated philosophical imaginings, thoughts could find rest. We will here argue that this could serve as a way to rethink certain taken-for-granted notions about what kind of activities management consists of, and also as a way to expand the notion of the management problem.

This essay will not, however, lay claims to being able to translate completely the sublime and often very difficult philosophical thinking of Wittgenstein into the realm of management studies. This so obviously would be impossible – and we will here not go into the difficulty of sorting out the different periods of Wittgenstein's thinking. Nor is this essay intended to offer a complete, novel theory of management. Rather, we will here point to certain aspects of how management and problem solving have usually been discussed, and suggest some avenues of development. In this sense, this should be read as a prolegomena to a field which does not exist. Similarly, even though we will talk of a theory of 'letting go', we are in no way claiming to have such a theory. Instead we are trying to point out that non-action and ignorance of problems represents a theoretical *lacuna*. This also means that we are not even trying to offer exact definitions of the concepts we use. As the notion we are trying to discuss in this essay is ephemeral, vague and often beyond the provenance of discourse, we face the not altogether unpleasant predicament of being unable to attack the problem head-on. What we discuss here might instead best be illustrated through an example (graciously suggested by professor Claes Gustafsson):

A man, living in the archipelago, takes a city-dwelling friend on a short trip in his boat. It is a wooden boat, used mostly for fishing and transporting things between islands. The friend notices that the engine gives off a lot of smoke, and points this out to the owner of said boat. The reply? 'Eh' and a shrug. A somewhat provincial example, perhaps, but change it: It is not a boat, but an office. It is not a

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Oxford, Blackwell 1958

² Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value* Oxford, Blackwell 1980

smoking engine, but the somewhat curt telephone manners of the sellers. Or the tacky typography on a brochure. Or, even, slight smoke from one of the lathes on the factory floor. 'Eh' and a shrug. How are we to understand this shrug?

Changing tack somewhat, we can state that teaching management at a school focused on technology and engineering (the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm) is in many ways an enlightening experience. It also affords one the opportunity of reflecting on some issues that seem to dominate in both these fields, technology and management as academic disciplines with an assumedly pragmatic base. More specifically, we are here talking about the notion of 'solving problems'. The scare-quotes here are not meant to specify there being something fundamentally deep or complex to the issue, just that this innocuous phrase obviously means a lot to some people. We are taught that engineering is the science of problem solving with technology, whereas management is often thought of as the art of solving business-related problems. Attached to this is the belief that the world is filled with problems, and that the business of the sciences – particularly the pragmatic ones – is solving them.³ Preferably, the sciences should solve them all, even though we accept that new ones will constantly pop up. This, in short, seems to be the justification for business schools and institutes of technology: there are problems, and we need to learn how to solve them.

One could argue that by stating this we are reducing or even demeaning management. It is clear, and has been so for a very long time, that management consists of much more than merely problem solving. Things such as motivation, creating a vision, story-telling, handling relations and strategising all contain aspects that go beyond the notion of solving a set problem. Management is a complex set of tasks, and contains so many processes that it might not even be possible to exhaustively define it or conclude exactly what kind of 'thing' management is. This is also one of the fields where Wittgenstein's philosophy can help us. Instead of trying to define words, he exhorted, we should observe how they are used in natural language, and instead of attempting to find the exclusive properties of phenomena, we should examine how they interrelate and blend into another – to study their 'family resemblances'. One such natural language term, which also seems to function as one of the concepts that tie together different understandings of management, is 'problem'. Even though management is not all about problem solving, and even though there obviously are many and varied problems managers have to deal with, we can still state that in our thinking and talking about management, the category of the problem exists as a thread in all the varied discussions, discourses and theorisations we have thereof. Yet, we lack a rigorous philosophical analysis of this category, and its others, in the field.

It is quite natural and obvious that there are both small, mundane problems and big, serious ones. The problem solving we try to teach in universities almost by logical necessity falls in the latter category. But still these problems cannot be any old problems. Much of the power of titles such as those bestowed by business schools or institutes of technology derives from the way in which these seem to signify a special knowledge of solutions, as well as the capacity to solve *particular* knots and tangles. In many ways, a problem is only as good as its solution, and the solutions developed in institutions of higher learning are designed to be multidimensional, complex and, perhaps most important of all, legitimate in a specific cultural context – specifically that of the profession and the legitimacy connected to this. A solution that can be used by just any old Joe belittles both the problem *and* the solution. So much is made of how institutes of higher learning teach students to attack problems from many angles, and to see problems as inherently embedded and enmeshed in a network of political, economical, social and technological networks. In fact, much of what is done in universities today deals not so much with solving problems, but comprehending them as being much more difficult than they appear on surface. As the old adage goes, to a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail, so a university education is often seen as equipping people with more than a hammer.⁴ Sometimes this means equipping them with a large but predefined set of tools, so that they will not see everything as a nail, but still always perceive of the world as manageable with their toolset. They may see problems as nails, bolt, screws and pieces of metal requiring filing down, but rarely as a social construction or a symbolic dragon. Other schools have a different approach, often called something along the lines of 'reflective' or 'critical'. This entails giving the students both a bewildering array of tools and presenting them with proof that those tools

³ See eg Graeme Salaman (ed) *Decision-Making for Business* London, Sage 2001

⁴ Cf Henry Mintzberg *Managers not MBAs* London, Prentice Hall 2004

will not always work. Consequently one hopes to create people who will, when faced with a problem, not have a fixed preconceived notion thereof, but instead treat it as a local and in some ways novel phenomenon. This less-than-normative way pleases many, on both aesthetic and intellectual grounds.

We have been trained within this latter camp, so our teaching has usually focused on the problem with viewing problems as solvable by universally applicable models. Instead, when teaching we have usually pointed to how each practical problem, as opposed to the abstractions we create in lectures, will require unique and localised solutions. And this, to me, was sufficient. However, as of late some threads that we now realise have long been present in those jumbled flashes of neural activity of mine, have started to confuse the issue. In part, some of the most fundamental beliefs regarding problems and their solutions have started nagging me, and it is this that has prompted me to write on a particular mode of problem solving, namely 'letting go'.

On The Varieties of Problem Solving

Often we assume that any proper philosophical analysis of a concept or phenomenon has to be preceded by defining what the concept or phenomenon is. In this case, one could assume that it would be necessary to start by defining what a 'problem' is. We will try to do no such thing. One of the things which made it possible for Wittgenstein to go further in philosophical analysis than his forebears was precisely the fact that he rejected the classical form of analysis.⁵ Instead of attempting a full definition of a word or a concept, the philosopher should instead look to how things appear in use. For instance, the creation of a definition of the word 'problem' might serve as a technical pastime or a cute *divertissement*, but if we want to understand the concept, we have to look to how the word is used in natural language, and above all, how people live with the concept. Note that it is not a psychological theory Wittgenstein espouses, as he rejects many of the theorems of psychology outright, but instead an analysis of social interactions.

Assume that you are faced with a problem. Pretend, for instance, that you are the chief executive of a corporation, and that you are faced with a competitor's aggressive tactics in your shared market-space. What do you do? For somebody with an 'educashon', the answer is obvious. Use this tool, and that, and collect more information, and get a more complete picture of the problem, and attempt this and that. Simply put, anybody with an 'educashon' will tell you how they think you should solve your problem.⁶ Some of them will offer up a 'sure thing'. They will tell you, often with a fair amount of fervour, that some imaginatively named solution – reengineering, imaginisation, branding, balanced scorecard – will fix it all, regardless of its generic makeup. Others will recommend a wide array of analyses, followed by a lot of strategising, followed by a complex plan for dealing with the problem. Often just looking at which school these people have been educated in will make it possible to guess which tactic they will endorse. Talk to a humanist or a philosopher with an interest in management issues, and you will most likely get a special version of this latter tactic. While accepting the need for analysis and strategy, they will also use words such as 'wisdom' and 'philosophy' to point out that any solution will only be tentative and partial, and that despite the existence of models and theories, human reason is still where it's all at. In other words, philosophers tend to prescribe philosophy as a solution to problems. Humanists will proffer 'reflection' or 'critique' as a similar universal solution. In fact, get enough academics in a room, present a problem, and you will have at least as many solutions as you have academics – and often many, many more.

⁵ This is something one can find in a germinal form in the *Tractatus*, and which Wittgenstein develops in the *Investigations*. I will ignore the question whether we have to split his earlier from his later thinking, as it is very difficult to answer briefly, but I believe the importance of this split has been exaggerated.

⁶ C.f. Charles S. Peirce *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking* New York, State University of New York Press 1903/1997

However, assume you present the same problem to a less educated soul, such as a child or a working man (or woman). Although many of these will quite certainly tell you their solution to the problem, and do so with far less verbiage and in a significantly faster manner than the academics, some of them might in fact ask whether you should do anything at all. ‘–Why?’, they might ask, ‘–You’d be better off just ignoring it.’

Against Problems

Interestingly enough, some philosophers, with the magisterial Ludwig Wittgenstein as possibly the finest example, have objected to the claim that philosophy solves anything at all, besides the problems created by philosophy itself. Much of what looked like problems was to Wittgenstein merely confusion,⁷ and he emphasised that he didn’t offer solutions, only ‘therapy’. In fact, much of his thinking dealt with not getting into the problem solving associated with philosophy, but instead with identifying what can be said and what one shouldn’t bother with. Something similar can be found in the works of American pragmatism, such as when William James wanted to find out what claims could actually matter, and which represented mere empty metaphysics.⁸ What is in play here is a truly radical notion, one that breaks with much of what is taken for granted in Western thought (and which, in a way, lies at the heart of Zen and Taoist Buddhism), namely that some problems need not be solved.

There seems to be a contradiction here, but only if one gets too entangled in notions of causality and necessary connections. Often we seem to think that the defining characteristic of a problem is that it represents something to be solved, in the same way a state in the world (such as war or hydrochloric acid) represents the result of certain previous states and reactions. But this is not the only way to view problems. Take the simple arithmetic of $2+3=5$. We can say that $2+3=x$ (with x as the common form of representing a question in arithmetic) is a problem, or that $2+x=5$ is a problem, and so forth. 5 (five) is not a problem, however. We can construct a problem out of it, and our brains often seem hardwired to do so (mathematically inclined persons often turn perfectly mundane observations, such as the numbers ‘12, 36, 60’ on a billboard, into mini-problems), but it is on some level just a simple thing in the world, one of the infinity of things of which Wittgenstein stated ‘The world is everything that is the case.’ Problems both are and aren’t all around us.

Of course, in philosophy this has meant dividing problems into ‘real’ and ‘false’ ones. For William James, metaphysical problems were often non-problems, since they didn’t ‘do’ anything in the world. For Wittgenstein, many of the issues in philosophy merely looked like problems, and could be dealt with simply by showing them as jumbled thinking. So, in a way, these thinkers did not so much criticise the solving of problems as radically decrease the number of issues that should be perceived as problems. What unites James and Wittgenstein is that both realised there were issues that were not really fruitful to think too hard about, particularly not if one thought to ‘solve’ them. Among these was the problem of defining what a word means. In a move that predates deconstruction and post-structuralism Wittgenstein deftly showed how the search for the true meaning of a word – the problem of what a word ‘really stands for’ – was doomed to failure due to the ever-changing and tentative nature of language. By exhorting people to examine the use rather than the meaning of a word, he in a sense dissolved the problem of a word’s meaning; there was no problem to begin with. This did not mean that thinking should cease, quite the contrary, but the search for a fixed and eternal ‘solution’ to the problem of what a word means was shown to be futile and pointless.

Still, this does not mean that Wittgenstein felt that there were problems that needn’t be solved. In a way, he posits a meta-problem: How can we sort out the real problems from the pseudo-problems? But there is another possible interpretation, one that comes closer to his ethic and religious sensibilities, that could be made. By showing how a number of things that we perceive of as problems are best left aside, ignored, Wittgenstein (and James) may in fact be

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein *The Blue and Brown Books* Oxford, Blackwell 1958

⁸ William James *The Meaning of Truth* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1909/1979

showing something far more fundamental. Sometimes problems need not be solved. Sometimes there is much wisdom (that strange and confusing word) in not thinking unnecessarily hard about things. Sometimes it is best just to let go.

In Praise of Ignorance

What we mean by 'letting go' is the following: the art of management (understood in the broadest sense and encompassing all activities in which intentional organisation is enacted) is not merely a matter of problem solving, but also deals with how to ignore or bypass problems in the world. It is a logical surety that one can always posit more problems than one can practically deal with at a time. Walking to work means, on a specific level, ignoring a number of problems. These include metaphysical problems (What is 'this' 'I' that 'walks' to 'work?'), political problems (ignoring the number of political organisations and issues one meets while walking through town.), social problems (people living on the street, poverty, troubled children and people with 'problems in living') and practical problems (How am I to pay this month's rent?). Were we to try to solve all problems confronting us, we would become paralyzed. So we have developed finely attuned mechanisms for ignoring issues and bypassing problems. This much should be obvious. What our imagined critic would say is that this proves nothing at all, since we have only highlighted that problem solving takes place in a dispersed fashion, so that certain people solve certain problems at certain times. And she would be quite right.

The observation that we do not solve all problems we are confronted with immediately and in parallel proves only that we are capable of compartmentalisation. The observation that we ignore some problems completely arguably shows that we extend this to certain problems assumedly being solved by other individuals and/or agencies. Poverty in the streets may be a good example of this. A lay sociologist would probably call this the 'Not my problem'-syndrome. Even though we see the problem, we do not try to solve it, for we believe that there is some other acting body that tries to do so. We may even express our disgust at the inability of this other agent to solve the problem, and moralise about this: 'If I had the possibility, I would...' Some of the non-solving of problems can thus be accounted for by referring to extension, removal, and dispersal.

Taking this into account, there still remains a number of problems you are confronted with on a daily basis and which you ignore or pass by. Often this is done on an unconscious level, resulting in your being unaware of the existence of said problem – the sidestepped puddle, the letter laid aside, the argument not gotten into. Such acts, which we often ignore as being acts due to their minimalist nature, are in fact a continuous accompanying theme to the more visible act of solving problems. We continually let things go, but we seldom think about what this means. Note that this cannot be reduced to a mere psychological process. One part of an extended theory of problems would deal with the fact that problems can be constituted, highlighted and excluded by way of mental processes such as denial and focus, and discursive strategies such as phrasing things as either problems or non-problems. Such strategies, however, are merely part of a grander totality of what could be referred to as the 'problem space'. While studies both in social psychology, decision making and organisational behavior have studied the social construction of problems, there has been very little work done on ignoring problems as a beneficial and necessary part of handling situations. When the act of ignoring problems has been discussed, such as in the famous analysis of the Bay of Pigs debacle or in the works of Karl Weick, this has always been done with the implicit or (more often) explicit assumption that it expresses a pathological state. My claim here would instead be that such ignorance might not only be beneficial at times, it is logically necessary. And it is this *necessity* of ignorance that has remained undiscussed in management studies.

The Art of Letting Go

For somebody in the business of solving problems, and we include both CEOs and management scholars in places of higher learning in this category, all this presents either a conundrum or a possibility. From the viewpoint of management, letting certain things be is a necessity. As studies of managerial practice have shown, much of the work of eg a CEO consists of delegating and selecting what parts of the chaotic whole one focuses on. A manager might in this perspective be someone whose main work lies in ignoring stuff – i.e. letting go, letting be. However, this is almost always seen as a highly active occupation. The manager doesn't ignore, she chooses. She doesn't turn a blind eye, she focuses on the most important issues. Obviously, this is only part of the story. Among the many capacities of a manager we can obviously find a kind of courage, namely the capability of not being unduly bothered by not having paid attention to everything that might be important. When choosing how to act, we also choose how to ignore, how to crop things out of our perspective, and to do this in a conscious way takes courage and a certain maturity. And this kind of poise may even be a constitutive part of leadership.

What we suggest, then, is neither necessarily original nor even particularly new, but still disregarded often enough to warrant its rephrasing: A theory of decision making must, as an integral part, contain a theory of how to ignore problems, i.e. on letting go. Such a theory of non-action, or one of intentional myopia, would obviously go against the notion of decision-makers as omnipotent thinkers who can solve any problem, but it would be very close to the actual practice of decision making, where demarcation and partial disregarding of things plays an important part. The question arises why theorising this wilful non-action is so difficult. Whereas theorising action has its own problems, developing thinking about not acting seems to go against the very notion of theory.

At the same time, there is obviously much to be said both for and about letting go. A conceptualisation of disregarding things would require us to accept the negation of many things we cherish: progress, action, advance. It would also allow us to have a more multifaceted theory of decision making, for rather than chasing that elusive event of the 'decision' we could observe the ebb and flow of 'decisionality', the dialectic of deciding and ignoring, of intention and allowing for not intending. The theory of letting go would also be a letting go of the idea that decision making is, in all its aspects, an activity - as it obviously to some extent is a non-such.

But what would such a theory look like? We will offer some starting points, but it is clear that developing thinking about letting go is a process that will require much work. With this in mind, we have some ideas about how to start an inquiry into letting go of problems.

- 1 Inaction must be understood as a more complex notion than merely a function of action, i.e. letting go is neither a non-action (the negation of an action) nor the action of not acting (it has to be allowed a nature of its own). Instead, it has its own nature.
- 2 Letting go is not the same as cowardice or ineffectuality. Instead, letting go requires maturity and a certain engagement with both the self and the world. In order to leave a problem, you must in some way have the capacity to engage with it. It requires more than mere myopia.
- 3 Letting go is, in some way, a theory of potential. It shows us the many avenues our life could take us, the tangled webs of the world, the endless possibilities. And also the limits of our potential, the fact that we can never do everything we could do. In a world of potentials, letting go unmask our capacity for it.
- 4 Letting go is related to ethics. It involves being in the world and accepting one's limits, laying certain things to rest, walking on when one could stop. It can develop into a negative ethics – not caring – or a positive one, but it will always relate to our being in the world.
- 5 Letting go is related to wisdom.

Taking the above into account, a theory of letting go could never be normative, nor could it ever be particularly precise. It might in fact be a theory of what Kant called *Urteilkraft*, thus encompassing both direct action, intuitive thinking, aesthetics (broadly understood) and calculative rationality, and through this a way to discuss human thinking in general. In this sense, it might be an art rather than a theory, a practice rather than a *praxis*.

Unterwegs

For Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosophy should strive for thought at rest, thought that weary from travel could sit down and find pause – and herein also lies the link between Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger.⁹ The notion of resting thought is clearly closely related to the notion of letting go. Both are related to a notion of serenity, the calm joy of freeing either something or oneself, the moment of Zen-like peace. When we free ourselves from the forced notion of there always being a problem ‘at hand’, we really do free ourselves.

What theories, such as those taught in business schools and institutes of technology, teach us about problems is rarely related to this form of problem solving, the disavowal of there being a problem. This is dangerous for two reasons. One, it teaches a *modus operandi* that goes against what we always already know and practise as human beings. Two, it propagates a theory of decision making that is fundamentally flawed. A theory of decision making or problem solving that cannot include the notion of an alterity, this pure actuality of conscious inaction, is not complete. Letting go is an existing, and very much a used alternative to the notion of ‘action’ or ‘decision’. It may not be the most easily captured notion, but this should not keep us from trying to engage with it. It may require us to leave behind certain things we have grown accustomed to in our thinking, but so be it. Sometimes thinking too requires letting go.

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⁹ See for instance Martin Heidegger ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking’ in: Martin Heidegger *On Time and Being* pp 55-73 New York: Harper & Row 1972

