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# ORGANIZATION (THEORY) AS A WAY OF LIFE

**Paul Du Gay**

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*To the extent that 'classical organization theory' is seen to possess any enduring interest it is mainly as a historic artefact. The idea that the principles, axioms, adages and devices elaborated by its proponents any longer possess traction in the present is rarely countenanced. In contrast to this customary view, the present article seeks to indicate the continuing significance of classical organization theory, for both analysing and intervening in organizational life. This necessitates a reconstruction of the conventional understanding of this received term, one in which classical organization theory is viewed less as 'theory' in the conventional sense, but rather as a geographically dispersed, institutionally disconnected and historically discontinuous 'stance', characterized, inter alia, by a pragmatist call to experience, an antithetical attitude to 'high' or transcendental theorizing, and, not least, an ethical focus on organizational effectiveness born of a close connection to 'the work itself' or 'the situation at hand'. Deploying the term 'classic organization theory' in this way, to refer to a stance, attitude or comportment, and an associated persona that bears it, we are able to highlight the significant differences between this comportment and the increasingly 'metaphysical' attitude characterizing many contemporary approaches to organization and organizing, not simply in organization studies, but also more widely in sociology and cultural economy.*

KEYWORDS: classical organization theory; stance; Pierre Hadot; metaphysics; corporate scandals

## Introduction

In a number of general accounts of 'the history' of management and organization theory, it is customary to order the diverse contributions into a singular (almost teleological) narrative charting the unfolding of an increasingly complex and sophisticated analysis of organization and organizing – what Bryson (1986) termed, in another context, the 'essential copy' (Greenberg & Baron 2008; Robbins *et al.* 2006; Wren 2005). Departing, more often than not, from the mutually independent work of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Max Weber and their respective interests in the effective management of labour, on the one hand, and the ethos of bureaucratic office holding, on the other, the first port of call in the historical tour is what is termed 'classic management theory' (Perrow 1979) or 'classic organization theory' (Shafritz & Ott 2001). In this tradition, a disparate group of figures, including, for instance, Henri Fayol and Lyndall Urwick, but also Mary Parker Follett and Chester Barnard (as classic 'hinges' between the so-called 'scientific management era' and the 'social person era'; Wren 2005, p. 321) are represented as seeking to formulate and systematize a repertoire of basic or 'universal' principles to be applied to and in organizations. One common feature of their very different work is frequently highlighted:

that their point of departure is from 'within' organizational life, rather than from one of the classic academic disciplines, as they all, in one way or another, had direct, practical experience of management and organization from their positions as business executives, directors or management consultants (O'Connor 2012). More often than not, their practical focus is deemed something of a weakness when seen through a sociological lens, for example, as it seems to indicate a restricted vision imposed by the dictates of a 'managerialist' perspective.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the so-called classic theorists are often portrayed within the social and human sciences as a group of practitioners with scientific aspirations who took an important step towards understanding aspects of organization, but one characterized by a narrow, instrumental outlook and a certain naivety, not least in their eagerness to formulate so-called universal principles. The latter limitations are linked primarily to their focus on organizational effectiveness, which is deemed to inhibit their capacity to exercise sufficient 'critical distance', and/or to pay due attention to the broader (bigger, deeper, wider) social, cultural, economic and political environment within which organizations exist.

Like Michels and Weber, most of them took a limited view of organizations as being merely administrative hierarchies with well-defined tasks to perform, and they thought they were creating rigorous, scientific theories [...]. But unlike Michels and Weber they used the plain language of managers, they rarely attempted to compare organizations from different areas, and they focused their thinking on how to make organizations more effective. (Starbuck 2003, p. 167)

The focus upon effectiveness is therefore viewed as a sign of a simplistic understanding of organizations as formal and rational entities, one fundamentally linked to the managerial preoccupations of those writers:

It seems clear that the rational-model approach uses a closed-system strategy. It seems also clear that the developers of the several schools using the rational model have been primarily students of performance or efficiency, and only incidentally students of organizations [...] The rational model of an organization results in everything being functional – making a positive, indeed an optimum, contribution to the overall result. (Thompson 1967, p. 6)

In line with such characterizations, the history of organization theory portrayed in many texts also turns out to be a narrative of theoretical progress, whereby the relatively unsophisticated, narrowly focused (and instrumental), bootstrapping efforts of the early pioneers have been followed, progressively, by evermore sophisticated understandings of organization and organizing.

In this article, I wish to dispute the basic tenets of this characterization of classical organization theory, and in so doing to reconstruct our understanding of this received term in two distinct but related ways. First, I suggest that classical organization theory should be viewed less as 'theory' in the conventional sense, and rather as a geographically dispersed, institutionally disconnected and historically discontinuous 'stance' (Van Fraassen 2002), characterized, *inter alia*, by a pragmatist call to experience, an antithetical attitude to 'high' or transcendental theorizing, an admiration for scientific forms of enquiry (in the Weberian sense of the 'disciplined pursuit of knowledge', and, as such, not reducible to the laboratory sciences, nor to the content of the sciences *per se*), and, not least an ethical focus on organizational effectiveness born of a close connection to 'the

work itself' or 'the situation at hand'. Deploying the term 'classic organization theory' in this way, to refer to a stance, attitude or comportment, and an associated persona that bears it, we are able to highlight the particular approach to organization as an object of analysis and intervention it expresses, one with a distinctively practical focus and ethos that differs considerably from many contemporary approaches, not simply in organization studies, but also in sociology and cultural economy, for instance. Viewing classical organization theory as a stance, and not first and foremost as a cluster of theories, a historical period, or a canon of 'pioneers', the range of work that can be deemed 'classical' within the field of Organization Theory expands considerably. Alongside the 'usual suspects' mentioned earlier, we might reasonably include among many others, for instance, the early work of members of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and its affiliates, figures such as Eric Trist, Eric Miller, Elliott Jacques and Wilfred Brown. Seeing classic organizational theory as a stance also enables us to upend the reflex accusation of anachronism and contemporary irrelevance directed at it from the present. As Charles Perrow (1979, pp. 58–59) succinctly put it, despite all the opprobrium heaped upon the concepts developed by practitioners of the classical stance, 'all the resources of organisational research and theory today have not managed to substitute better principles (or proverbs) for those ridiculed'. The latter, and the stance involved in developing them, 'have worked, and are still working, for they addressed themselves to very real problems of management, problems more pressing than those advanced by social science'. In other words, the classic stance in organization theory can be applied to contemporary matters of organizational concern without any need to 'update' it. Second, and relatedly, I will suggest that rather than simply advocating or offering a systematic 'theory' or set of principles of organization, practitioners of the classical stance are also fundamentally concerned with enunciating a 'protreptic', a practical concern with organization and management as a 'vocation' (Weber 1989, 1994), 'habitus' (Mauss 1979) or 'a way of life' (Hadot 2009). While Barnard, Parker Follett and Wilfred Brown, for instance, are clearly preoccupied with matters of form and system, they are not at all interested in developing a conceptual edifice as an end in itself. Metaphysics and ontology are almost completely absent. Rather, the classicists are not seeking simply to 'inform', but equally to persuade, transform or produce a 'formative effect' for a specific audience – most notably those, including themselves, for whom 'organization' is 'a way of life'. In so doing, they equally share a fundamental recognition that principles under-determine conduct. This helps explain their mutual concern with 'casuistry' (not a term they use, but something they practice), and the significance of 'case-based' reasoning in their work. We can begin to see this, if we briefly consider the way they approach the practical performance of the various 'tasks' constituting the work of an organization (for what is an organization if it is not a way of arranging for the coordinated performance of tasks?<sup>2</sup>). For each, the standards (or 'principles') set for different aspects of a specific task are always in conflict with each other, to some greater or lesser extent, and hence confront those charged with performing them as something approximating to a 'balancing operation'. There is no 'conclusive' or 'principled' solution to the dilemmas posed by this kind of situation. Rather, the 'classical stance' expresses a casuistic insistence of the necessity of a principle of situation-specific judgement. Principle and rules are indeed important, but as assessment is required, practical experience becomes the soul of wisdom (Brown 1965). In short, in classical organizational theory, as a stance, casuistry shadows the whole repertoire of practice, and it constitutes a necessary, indeed, crucial, dimension of organizational reasoning and

conduct, most significantly, when people are caught between conflicting patterns of duty in relation to task performance. The article concludes by suggesting that a suitably contextualized re-engagement with and re-appropriation of the 'classical stance' in organization theory may well serve to enhance the practical relevance and explanatory power and reach of contemporary organizational analysis, whether it be undertaken in organization studies, sociology or in cultural economy.

### From 'Theory' to 'Stance'

Let us begin, then, by exploring what it might mean to approach classical organization theory not as an identifiable theory or set of theories, but as a 'stance', 'attitude', 'compartment' or a 'way of life' (Hadot 1995, 2001, 2009; Van Fraassen 2002; Hunter 2006, 2009a, 2009b). In undertaking such a venture, I will begin by turning to the work of Pierre Hadot for assistance. Hadot was, of course, no organizational theorist. Rather, he was a historian of ancient Greco-Roman philosophy whose work has had a profound effect on how ancient philosophy as an activity should be conceived of and understood. Deploying Hadot's work in the context of organization theory should not be viewed as some sort of 'affectation' designed to elevate the argument being made by attaching it to a prestigious object – 'ancient philosophy'. Rather, the method Hadot elaborated in his work on ancient philosophy is introduced here precisely because it can, I suggest, illuminate many significant aspects of classical organization theory that currently fall below the horizon of visibility within the social and human sciences, not least, perhaps, its potential practical relevance to addressing many contemporary matters of organizational concern.

Hadot's approach to Greek philosophy as first and foremost *a way of life*, and not the construction of a theoretical system, has been appropriated as something akin to a methodological axiom in a range of intellectual contexts, most notably, perhaps, in the work of Michel Foucault (1984, 1986), whose last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* owe a huge debt to Hadot's pioneering work on 'spiritual exercises' understood as philosophical practices which were intended 'to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practices them' (Hadot 2002, p. 6).<sup>3</sup> So what explanatory reach might Hadot's approach possess in helping us approach classical organization theory as an activity? Let us begin by unpacking some of the key elements of Hadot's 'method' before moving on to address that question directly.

In a series of texts beginning with *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), and proceeding through *The Inner Citadel* (2001), his pioneering study of the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (2002), and culminating in the posthumously published, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness* (2009), Pierre Hadot elaborated a distinctive programme, for understanding what ancient philosophy is, as a practical activity. For Hadot (2002, p. 1), a crucial distinction needed to be made between the history of philosophical ways of life and the history of philosophies, 'if what we understand by philosophies are theoretical discourses and philosopher's systems'. Unpacking this distinction involved Hadot in two moves: on the one hand, informing the reader of a set of empirical arguments that decisively showed that for the Greeks philosophy was not the construction of an abstract theoretical 'system', but rather a choice of life; and, on the other, to allow the reader of the ancient works, and of Hadot's own texts, to turn towards philosophy thus understood (Hadot 2009, p. xi). In short, Hadot adopted an indirectly protreptic method to show his readers that the ancient treatises are, almost without

exception, *protreptics*. For the ancients, he argues, philosophy was above all a way of life, and this is why schools, such as the Cynics, who had *no* theoretical discourse, were called philosophical, and why almost anyone, including women, soldiers or politicians, could be described as philosophers, because of the manner in which they conducted themselves, the way of life they pursued. For Hadot, ancient philosophy should be seen first and foremost in terms of the spiritual exercises it elaborated, each of which was aimed at bringing about a transformation of the individual practicing it. Greek philosophers did not attempt 'to provide a systematic theory of reality, but to teach their disciples a method with which to orient themselves both in thought and life' (Hadot 2009, p. 90).

When Plato writes his dialogues, when Aristotle gives his courses and publishes his course notes, when Epictetus writes his letters ... in all these cases, indeed, the philosopher expounds a doctrine. However, he exposes it in a certain way – a way that aims to form more than to inform. (Hadot 2009, p. 88)

We can better appreciate this point about 'formation', if we turn briefly to Hadot's (2001) book on the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, *The Inner Citadel*. According to Hadot (2001, p. 243), the *Meditations* is neither a journal nor a theoretical textbook, as has often been suggested. Rather, the text should be seen as a series of 'spiritual exercises' prescribed by the Stoic tradition, and in particular the form of Stoicism defined by Epictetus, which Marcus Aurelius wrote down to influence himself and produce an effect upon himself as he confronted the concrete, situational problems his role as an Emperor – and as a father, husband, and so forth – posed for him. For Marcus Aurelius, the point of the *Meditations* is to re-actualize, and reawaken in himself, the stoic dogmas that must guide his life. Indeed, the manuscripts entitle Marcus Aurelius's book 'For Himself', and this conforms to what the text is designed to do. These are not 'Thoughts' or 'Theories' intended for others, or intricate elaborations expressing the author's aesthetic sensibility, his psychology or biography. The temptation to read ancient texts in terms of modern preoccupations or categories – to imagine that the *Meditations* tell us something about Marcus Aurelius's inner psychological state, or reveal intimate aspects of his biography – are anachronisms. Rather the intention is clearly inscribed in both the content and form of the work (Hadot 2009, p. 63).

As Hadot (2009, p. 63) indicates, it is very easy to fall victim to anachronism when it comes to interpreting an ancient text – something he felt was exactly the problem with Foucault's engagement with ancient philosophy – because it is not easy to grasp the 'historical conditions' in and under which it was written: who it is aimed at, who it imitates, and so on. As I suggested earlier, it has been frequently stated that the *Meditations* are either the elaboration of a theory, or something akin to a diary, charting Marcus Aurelius's everyday states of mind. Such interpretations are precisely anachronistic because, among many other things, they fail to grasp the literary genre to which the work belongs. As Hadot (2001, 2009, p. 64) points out on many occasions, in the case of ancient philosophy, the rules of discourse were rigorously codified; one must therefore constantly keep in mind that the ancients 'were writing in a traditional system, which obeyed the requirements proper to each literary genre'. In order to understand exactly the import of an affirmation, axiom or aphorism, to say nothing of the general purpose of a text, Hadot (2009, pp. 64–65) suggests that it is important to first note what working in the literary genre forces the author to say – because they are a Stoic, or an Epicurean, for instance – then what the author can say – for example, the possibility of exaggerating the presentation of a doctrine in order to strike the mind more forcefully – and finally, what

the author's purpose is, what the author means to do – in the case of Marcus Aurelius, the *Meditations* is a vehicle for self-exhortation; it is designed to awaken in their author the stoic dogmas that were to govern the conduct of his life, in all its aspects and elements, but that had lost some of their persuasive force over time; thus it was necessary to attempt constantly to persuade himself anew.

His goal was to have the Stoic dogmas at hand in an efficient manner – in particular, the three fundamental precepts of Epictetus: never let anything into the mind that is not objective, always take the good of the human community as the end of one's actions, and make one's desires conform to the rational order of the universe. There is thus an internal logic to Marcus Aurelius' book. But in order to awaken these principles in all circumstances, one must adopt the form of the aphorism: the short and striking formula that gives them life again. (Hadot 2009, pp. 57–58)

Thus, the aphorisms of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* conform to a triadic structure – the distinction of three Stoic 'spiritual exercises' (*askesis*): the discipline of desires, the discipline of action and the discipline of judgement. These disciplines consist, respectively, in making one's desires, actions and judgements conform to 'reason'. The presence of this schema in the work indicates that the author's intention is clear: to reawaken and reactualize the Stoic dogmas in the conduct of Marcus Aurelius's life. Marcus Aurelius wants to place himself into a specific disposition.

To reiterate, according to Hadot the task of ancient philosophy is not primarily one of communicating 'an encyclopaedic knowledge in the form of a system of propositions and of concepts that would reflect, more or less well, the system of the world' (quoted in Davidson 1995, p. 22). *Definitions were nothing by themselves, independently of the road travelled to reach them.* The philosophers of antiquity were not interested in 'ready-made knowledge', but with imparting that comportment, training and education that would allow their disciples 'to orient themselves in thought, in the life of the city, or in the world'. At their heart, oral or written, ancient philosophies are 'spiritual exercises' intended 'to make those subject to them practice a method, rather than a doctrinal exposition' (Hadot, quoted in Davidson 1995, p. 21). Rather than aiming at the acquisition of an abstract knowledge per se, these exercises aimed at realizing a transformation of one's vision of the world, one's conduct in it and a metamorphosis of one's persona. Spiritual exercises were *exercises* because they were practical, required training, education and effort, and were lived; they were *spiritual* because they involved a shift in one's entire comportment, attitude, stance – one's way of being.

We must discern that the philosopher's underlying intention, which was not to develop a discourse which had its end in itself but to act upon souls. In fact, each assertion must be understood from the perspective of the effect it was intended to produce in the soul of the auditor or reader. Whether the goal was to convert, to console, to cure, to exhort the audience, the point was always and above all not to communicate to them some ready made knowledge, but to form them. In other words, the goal was to learn a type of know-how; to develop a habitus, or new capacity to judge and to criticize; and to transform – that is to change people's way of living and of seeing the world. (Hadot 2002, p. 274)

As Hadot (1995) argues, philosophers of antiquity were philosophers because of their existential attitude or stance. The latter was the foundation of their philosophy and

required those seeking to inhabit it to undergo a conversion, in the strongest sense of that term, to radically change the conduct of their life. Thus we begin with a fundamental existential choice on behalf of a way of life that consists of certain practices, activities and conduct that are precisely what Hadot terms 'spiritual exercises'. Philosophical discourse, of oneself with oneself, and of oneself with others, will, of course, be needed to justify and communicate these spiritual exercises, to represent the fundamental existential attitude, but 'philosophy itself consists primarily in choosing and living the attitude' (Davidson 1995, p. 31).

As I indicated earlier, Hadot's method and analysis resonates with that of others working in cognate fields. In his critique of contemporary analytic metaphysics and objectifying epistemologies, the philosopher of science, Bas Van Fraassen (2002, p. 61), has recently argued that 'all the great philosophical movements' are in effect 'stances' (or, to put it in Hadot's terms 'ways of life'), and that becoming an 'empiricist' or a 'materialist' (or a Stoic or an Epicurean) is then 'similar or analogous to conversion to a cause, a religion, an ideology'. For Van Fraassen (2002, p. 62):

stances do involve beliefs and are indeed inconceivable in separation from beliefs and opinions. The important point is that a stance will involve a great deal more, will not be identifiable through the beliefs involved, and can persist through changes in belief.

As Van Fraassen (2002, p. 61) suggests, although this prospect will 'not be to everyone's liking ... let us not colour the project with guilt by association'. After all, if we approach opposed philosophies, not as rival theories of truth, but as rival 'stances' or 'spiritual exercises', we can see them as specific activities, and can thus subject them to empirical examination in terms of what they do to those 'called' to or by them, and how they do it. For Van Fraassen (2002, p. 62), no stance is innocent or above the fray, and his work is focused, in particular, on the ongoing battle between what he terms 'the empirical stance' and the 'metaphysical' stance in various fields of contemporary philosophy. In a similar vein, the historian of ideas, Ian Hunter (2006, 2009a, 2009b), has also developed the idea of 'philosophical self-fashioning' as a methodological concept to open up the question of what kind of activity post-structuralism (and associated programmes in what he terms 'the moment of theory') is, and what sort of intellectual persona it leads one to cultivate:

By re-describing philosophising as a particular kind of activity – as a work of the self carried out of the self for the purpose of transforming its mode of acceding to truth – this approach allows us to treat poststructuralist theorising itself as a concrete historical reality rather than an intellectual symptom of one ... It should be clear that in offering this characterisation of poststructuralist theorising we are not attempting to falsify it. As a concrete historical activity such theorising is no more capable of being false than is chess, yoga, or the Eucharist, and, by that same token, no more capable of being true. What we are doing, rather, is seeking to transform the register in which post-structuralism is understood: from that of a theory that might be true or false to that of an irrefragable activity, whose character is open to historical description and whose contextual circumstances are open to historical investigation that might indeed be true or false. Of course, this shift results in a dramatic change of outlook, as it means that an intellectual discipline dedicated to disclosing the pristine indeterminacy beneath empirical reality is itself treated as an empirical reality of a particular kind, hence as an object for an empirically-oriented intellectual history. (Hunter 2009b, pp. 9–10)

Like Hadot and Van Fraassen, Hunter too has metaphysics in his sights, though, unlike the former his main targets are not analytic philosophies, but the various philosophical problematizations of positive knowledge huddled together under the headings of postmodernism and post-structuralism. Hunter (2009a, p. 270) resolutely turns his face against an assumption framing many of these 'moments of theory'; namely that philosophical concepts are indeed cognitive by dint of their capacity to reveal the truth of reason or Being – or the truth of the latter's inaccessibility – and as such are therefore capable of acceding to knowledge in all departments of existence: law, politics and organization, for instance. Without attempting to settle the matter, Hunter (2009a, pp. 270–271) explores empirically key concepts in the postmodern canon – 'the transcendental reduction', difference and Being – in terms of the acts of self-transformation that operationalize them, with a view to seeing whether they do indeed function as a means to a generally accessible cognition. With regard to the former, for instance, he argues that:

Husserl's *epochē* or 'transcendental reduction' can be properly re-described as a particular kind of 'spiritual exercise', one in which the philosopher is required to suspend his commitment to all existing knowledges and natural experiences in order to clear a space for the manifestation of the 'transcendental phenomenon', or Being ... As such, the transcendental reduction appears as an act of self-transformation aimed at establishing a certain spiritual superiority in relation to 'natural selves'. This means that it is restricted to the circle of those undertaking the exercise, with no apparent general connection to 'external' objects or phenomena that one could call cognitive.<sup>4</sup>

The *epochē* is an act of inner ethical labour or asceticism, oriented to a certain kind of work on the self to transform it. Seen in this way, the transcendental reduction is simply one among a series of what Hadot terms philosophical 'spiritual exercises'. What is enjoined by this 'spiritual exercise' turns out to be quite important, though, involving as it does, an act of inner abstention from a whole array of knowledges and judgements arising from the 'factual' sciences and practical morality.

The aim is for the individual to suspend ordinary consciousness and to cultivate a specific kind of inner attentiveness – 'as a philosopher, in the uniqueness of his direction of interest' – in order to attain what Derrida calls 'the virgin glance'. This is a state of presuppositionless heightened anticipation into which the transcendental phenomenon can irrupt, bringing with it a view of the world briefly untouched by the designs of human hands and human consciousness. In other words, in its first iteration the transcendental reduction is a spiritual exercise for a certain kind of university metaphysician rather than, for example, a courtier or a warrior ... or a jurist in the service of a prince. (Hunter 2006, p. 86)

It should be appreciated that Hadot, Van Fraassen and Hunter do not use the term 'metaphysics' in a normative sense, as if to engage in metaphysical speculation were in and of itself, always and everywhere, a good or a bad thing to do. Rather, it is deployed in their work to specify a particular form of thought, a stance, comportment and an associated set of 'spiritual exercises'. Second, they do not use the term metaphysics as many philosophers do, to characterize true or false beliefs about the ultimate ontological constituents of reality. This does not, of course, mean that they do not have views about the role and place of metaphysical speculation, the 'spiritual exercises' associated with it, and the cultivated intellectual stance or comportment it composes or makes up.

Specifically, they suggest that such metaphysical stances or comportments are resolutely sectarian, formed by specific means and in distinctive contexts for particular purposes. They simply do not, indeed cannot, provide, as their advocates appear to assume, a generalized comportment 'for all seasons', as it were – one as resonant in the realms of politics, law or formal organization, as it might be in a philosophy seminar room (Fish 1994; du Gay 2010). This is a point to which we will return in due course. Now, however, we are ready to proceed to the central question posed earlier: what follows from seeing 'classical organization theory' through the frame provided by Hadot (Van Fraassen and Hunter), as a 'stance', comportment or 'way of life', rather than as 'theory', more narrowly defined, and why might such a shift of perspective be of anything but arcane academic interest?

We will begin this endeavour by exploring the work of two important figures in the history of organization theory – Chester Barnard and Wilfred Brown – whose reputations are largely premised on their *theoretical* contributions to the field. Barnard is routinely represented as an exemplary 'classicist' in conventional chronologies, whereas Brown published his first monograph shortly after the former's death, and is therefore clearly outside the parameters of the 'classical canon', as conventionally understood. In addition, Brown's work is, today, largely forgotten. Apart from both being successful executives, and taking on remarkably extensive organizational responsibilities across private, public and so-called 'third' sectors, what unites these two seemingly disparate organization theorists, I will argue, is the stance they adopt to 'Organization and Management Theory', which is 'classical' in the manner indicated in the Introduction above, being characterized by, for instance, a pragmatist call to experience, an antithetical attitude to theory building as an end in itself, an admiration for scientific forms of enquiry, and sustained focus on organizational effectiveness born of a close connection to 'the work itself'. In their organizational lives and their writing on organization, both seek to inform their readers with knowledge about what makes up (good) 'organization', but equally, and perhaps, more significantly, to produce a formative effect in those same readers, and, indeed, in themselves. Their target audience is predominantly assumed to be those for whom matters of organization and management are a way of life, a vocation, a habitus. To put it simply, these two 'theorists' are in fact engaged in a practical science of organizing, one in which *protreptics* plays a crucial role; they are seeking to form and transform how managers, for instance, conduct themselves. Their 'theory' is nothing in the abstract; it needs to be seen in terms of the practical road travelled to reach it, and its 'formative' purpose for those (including its authors) at whom it is aimed. Significantly, I will argue, the 'stance' they adopt, and the 'theory', axioms, adages and examples they elaborate are useful and important today, without there being any need to update them.

### **Organization (Theory) as a Way of Life: Chester Barnard and Wilfred Brown**

#### *Chester Barnard: The Protreptics of Organization*

One of the members of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences calls it Machiavellian because we did try to influence behaviour ... I thought that was the purpose of education. (Chester Barnard)

Fritz Roethlisberger, one of the authors of the canonical account of the Hawthorne Experiments, *Management and the Worker*, once remarked that Chester Barnard was ‘the only executive in captivity who could not only run a successful organization, but could also talk intelligently about what he was up to in the process’ (quoted in Wren 2005, p. 321). Barnard, of course, figures large in accounts of the history of organization theory, not least as the originator of a theory of ‘formal organization’ as a co-operative system – what John Kenneth Gailbraith once described as ‘the most famous definition of an organization’ – in his *The Functions of the Executive*, one of the acknowledged ‘classic texts’ of organization theory, generally, and a key accomplishment of ‘classical organization theory’, in particular. In commentary on the text, much is made of Barnard’s supposed surpassing of the concerns of the scientific management movement, and indeed, of the so-called rationalistic theory of organization attributed to Henri Fayol, for instance, both of which are deemed important but inherently limited contributions to understanding ‘organization’ (Wren 2005). The superiority of Barnard’s work in relation to its predecessors is therefore often premised upon its being the first to offer ‘a total theory of organization’ (Andrews 1968, p. x). The conventional building blocks for the history of organization theory are therefore all in place. Barnard’s work is a progression from what precedes it, and its major contribution is to be represented in theoretical terms, and appraised not least in how systematically and closely the theory gets to the ‘truth’ of organization in its totality (‘the essential copy’). While it would be ludicrous to suggest that Barnard is uninterested in matters of form, system, conceptual rigour and explanatory reach, it is also quite clear that he is not interested in constructing a theoretical edifice in and of itself. Indeed, the clues to an alternative understanding of what his major work is doing can be discerned if one is disposed to look. Barnard himself provides a number of statements that indicate very precisely that the book is as much ‘for himself’, as were the *Meditations* for Marcus Aurelius, and for not dissimilar reasons.

In the Preface to *The Functions of the Executive*, we find Barnard stating that one of the key motivations in writing the text was that ‘nothing of which I knew treated of organization in a way that seemed to me to correspond either to my experience or to the understanding implicit in the conduct of those recognized as adept in executive practice ...’ (Barnard 1938/1968, p. xxviii). Experience, here, is crucial for Barnard, as Ellen O’Connor (2012, p. 114), for instance, has made clear: Barnard used writing as a means of recording, organizing and testing his experience as a manager and an executive and as a ‘tool to explain his “mental processes”’, and explore his organizational conduct, to himself. He particularly reacted to ‘theorizing’ as an end in itself, and criticized those whose habitus devalued knowledge obtained from practical experience, particularly academics and intellectuals (1938/1968, pp. 301–322). While ‘book learning’ could be indispensable, it was not the be all and end all for Barnard. Rather, ‘local and personal knowledge of the everyday and commonplace matters’ of organizational existence, which ‘many people are unwilling to grant is knowledge at all’ is ‘absolutely indispensable for the acceptance and discharge of responsibility for all and any action, and the capacity for responsibility is a vital component in the execution of useful work’ (Barnard, quoted in O’Connor 2012, p. 114). Barnard set out to live this axiom in his own organizational conduct, seeking constantly to secure significant experience and to develop himself and his capacities through taking on an extraordinarily wide range of organizational roles and responsibilities in a variety of contexts.<sup>5</sup> As he put it, ‘significant experience is secured largely by adapting one’s self to varieties of conditions and by acquiring the sense of the appropriate in

varieties of action'.<sup>6</sup> When once asked about his extensive and intensive professional obligations, Barnard replied 'Look, every one of these things I get connected with has two things: one is the immediate, practical, pragmatic question of what you can do ... the second is, it's always a laboratory for me'. This was where he found out how things worked and, as he indicated, '[Y]ou have to be on the inside to do that' (quoted in O'Connor 2012, p. 114). *The Functions of the Executive* is therefore not a theoretical text on organization, in the narrow sense of 'theory' as an objectifying epistemic pursuit. While the text does pertain to the genre of an academic treatise, its epistemology is voluntarist, in the sense that, on the one hand, it rejects the 'theory' format of what knowledge and opinion are like, and, on the other, it allots a crucial role to experience and volition<sup>7</sup>; in effect, Barnard adopts an indirectly *protreptic* method, designed as we have suggested, as much to form as to inform. As he indicated in another context, 'we did try to influence behaviour ... I thought that was the purpose of education' (quoted in O'Connor 2013, p. 1). Indeed, the text was directed to forming and reforming Chester Barnard himself, as much as anyone else who read it with a view to understanding what it might mean to live 'organization as a way of life'. Overall, Barnard rewrote the book 16 times, and, as he stated, 'there is scarce a word that has not been thoroughly weighed', reworking it in effect throughout the course of his adult life. In one of his final interviews, held two months before his death in 1961, we find Barnard still revising the text, exhorting himself to test it against reality as he finds it, and appraising its reach and relevance for himself and for those similarly charged with 'co-ordinating and directing the activities of others'. *The Functions of the Executive* is, as Ellen O'Connor (2012, p. 137) has persuasively argued, a text 'that derives from and demonstrates the personal basis of organizational knowledge and the organizational basis of personal knowledge for Barnard personally'. For Barnard, organization was a choice of life, much as being a stoic was for Marcus Aurelius, and in his major work, as well as the other modes of address through which he developed his thinking on this choice of life, such as his commencement speeches (O'Connor 2013), he was concerned to indicate what such a choice entails, not least characterologically, and what personal dispositions and capacities it was necessary to cultivate in oneself if one was to live up to the demands of this particular vocation in a conscious and responsible, as well as efficient and effective manner.

### *Wilfred Brown on Organization and Judgment*

This book is not a theoretical one. It states a large number of concepts which may prove very useful to managers in ordering their daily work. Concepts are tools which enable people to think in a straight line about the problems they have to handle, so long as those concepts are reasonably well aligned to the situations with which we have to deal. If they are not well aligned those concepts direct our efforts to non-solutions, they confuse our thinking ... (Note to self on line one: 'Purpose and Intention')

Section entitled 'Concepts for Managers' (Marginal Note: 'Too general. Needs to start with an example')

Wilfred Brown, Draft Notes for a Book to be entitled 'The Grammar of Organization' ('Concepts Book') 1977. The Papers of Lord Brown, Churchill Archive Centre, University of Cambridge, BRWN 4/1/2

In his classic essay, *Complex Organizations*, the renowned organizational sociologist Charles Perrow (1979, pp. 24–26 & 44) offered an acute reconsideration of bureaucracy as a potentially positive, if often fragile, organizational achievement. In so doing, he had cause to turn at certain points to the work of Wilfred Brown, an experienced and successful manager, executive, Minister of State and organizational analyst, who rose to prominence in the field of organizational theory as a result of his involvement in the first major research project undertaken by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the UK after the Second World War: the Glacier Project, but whose work is now largely forgotten. Brown's experience of working within and empirically analysing the operations of bureaucratic hierarchy in a number of contexts had led him to argue, against the 'customary view' (Perrow 1979) in Organization Theory, that bureaucracy was neither inherently pathological nor dysfunctional but rather, in contrast, something that could potentially enable an organization to employ large numbers of people and yet preserve both unambiguous work role boundaries and accountability for work conducted by those occupying those roles. In particular, Brown stressed that the very formalities, or so-called 'rigidities', of bureaucratic hierarchy were not antithetical to flexibility, but rather its precondition (see also du Gay 2000; Stinchcombe 2001). Instead of being seen as mutually exclusive, as the 'customary view' within organizational theory had it, the one was seen as the condition of the other. For Brown, it was the relationship between the two that was important.

Like Barnard before him, Brown was, as Alistair Mant succinctly put it, 'in the great tradition of pioneers of industrial practice, in staying within the problems, devising empirical solutions, and developing theory the while'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in his report on the Draft Manuscript of Brown's *Exploration in Management* for the publisher W. Heinemann, Professor Leonard Sayles of Columbia University explicitly links Brown's work to Barnard's *The Functions of the Executive*, both in terms of content, and in terms of the 'stance' adopted to the 'nature of on-going human organisation'.<sup>9</sup> Like Barnard, Brown could not stomach theorizing for its own sake, and tended to be similarly intolerant of what Barnard described as the 'extraordinary amount of dogmatically stated nonsense' on the topic of organization emanating both from academics and from people 'of ample experience' (quoted in O'Connor 2013, p. 3). For Brown, the 'customary view' of bureaucracy was one such dogmatism, and he was at pains to indicate just how easy it was to slip into, and how much inner distance and self-discipline it took to avoid these sorts of trap, not least for practicing managers (Brown 1974, p. 114).

Brown's two major monographs, *Exploration in Management* (1965) and *Organization* (1974) are, as he indicated on many occasions, attempts to put down in writing everything he had learnt from his management and executive experience in industry and government. Experience is therefore at their heart, as it was also in the handwritten notes for his planned book, *The Grammar of Organization*<sup>10</sup> an excerpt from which was quoted above. Again, like Barnard, Brown used his writing and his numerous speaking engagements as ways of recording, organizing and testing his experience of managing and organization, and as a means of judging the adequacy of his own thinking and organizational conduct to himself. Brown's monographs, articles, speeches, television and radio series circle the same terrain time after time, and always with a view to enhancing practical understanding, and cultivating a conscious and responsible attitude to the matter of organization and management. As he noted at the outset of his planned text, *The Grammar of Organization*, 'this is not a theoretical book'. Rather its concepts derive from a

continuous engagement with experience and are aimed specifically at those in similar situations; those for whom 'organization' is 'a way of life'. Thus the intention once again is to form as much as it is to inform. Continuous reflection on his own experience of organizing is the basis of Brown's writing. The books, which are remarkably similar, almost identical, in fact, in content and attitude, are designed to overcome a temptation, to re-emphasize the importance of a particular attitude, to conduct a real therapy, in order to change the life, not only the beliefs, of the interlocutor, and the latter obviously includes Brown himself. The aim is clearly to form the mind of those engaged in organization, to teach it to recognize problems and methods of reasoning in a certain way, and thus to cultivate a particular attitude towards managing and organizing. Of crucial importance for Brown, as indeed for Barnard, is to be 'on the inside', because only there can one gain significant experience 'by adapting one's self to varieties of conditions and by acquiring the sense of the appropriate in varieties of action' (Barnard, quoted by O'Connor 2013, p. x). This cultivation of this latter sense of 'the appropriate', born of close and repeated proximity to 'the situation at hand' is perhaps the crucial component of the exercise of judgement, which both prize highly, not least because it is fundamentally 'concerned with decision-making where there is insufficient or ambiguous factual evidence' (Barnard, quoted in O'Connor 2013, p. x). Principle and factual evidence are indeed important, but as assessment is required, practical experience becomes the soul of wisdom. Hard work aimed at acquiring experience of 'the sense of the appropriate', and thus of learning to exercise responsible situational judgement, is 'one of the most significant aspects of a total education' (Barnard, quoted in O'Connor 2013, p. x).<sup>11</sup>

Through the prism of Brown and Barnard's work the now commonplace philosophical opposition between universalist deontology and consequentialism, and its 'organizational' manifestations in the seemingly mutually exclusive doctrines or principles of the right (*honestas*, or the 'human factor'), and the useful (*utilitas*, or 'the production side'), make little to no sense. We can see the 'casuistical' dissolution of such principled distinctions very clearly in the work Brown (1974), when he considers the matter of what we have now come to term 'performance management'.

For Brown (1965, p. 308), all work, and thus all work roles, no matter how ostensibly routine or circumscribed, requires 'decision-making' by those performing it. He defines work as 'the totality of discretion which a member is expected to exercise, and the proscribed acts he must discharge, in carrying out the responsibilities of the role he occupies' (Brown 1965). By discretion, Brown refers to an act or course of action adopted by an organizational member in a specific role, where the policy set for that role leaves alternative courses of action from among which that member has to choose. By proscribed acts, Brown means an act or course of action performed by a member in undertaking their work role, where the policy set allows that member no choice. In framing employment work in this manner, Brown is keen to highlight that the main basis on which the assessment of the performance of such work is to be undertaken is how an organizational member uses experience, knowledge and judgement in making decisions, rather than on the *apparent results* of their use of such experience, knowledge and judgement. As he puts it:

We too readily agree that chief executives should be assessed on the basis of the profit and loss account, that the factory manager should be solely assessed on the volume of output, or the civil servant on the speed with which they can introduce arrangements

that put into practice a change in Government policy. But these achievements – profit, volume of output, speed – are the end results of processes that involve not only the quality of the decisions made ... but also a host of other variables outside their control. It would be very convenient if these were objective parameters of the performance of people, but they are not. Many find this so distressing that they sometimes fail to face up to it and go on trying to assess the work done by subordinates or others on a quite unreal basis. The reason for their distress is that instead of the relatively easy task of looking, for example, at the output volume achieved by the factory manager and accepting the figures as an index of their performance they must, instead, take their whole experience of their performance over a period of time into account and use their own judgment in coming to a decision as to whether their performance is good, bad, or indifferent. Judging the performance of subordinates is, in a very real sense, hard work. (Brown 1974, pp. 110–111)

This 'hard work' is a form of casuistical reasoning where practical judgement is crucial. The quality of assessment depends on judgements concerning the significance of situational factors. In the case of the chief executive, for instance, the profit and loss account is itself affected by variables outside the control of any one member of the organization, such as the state of the market, the changing costs of raw materials, changes in Government policy, the decisions of the Board about such things as capital investment, and so on and so forth. The existence of these variables is obvious enough, so the question then is: exactly how useful or practical is it to undertake assessment of a chief executive's performance in terms of financial results alone? Quantitative indices, such as profit, output, volume of sales and so on, are very important, but in using them as the basis of an assessment of performance, 'it is essential to consider the other variables that have affected them, and to assess how far they are a function of a manager's performance' (Brown 1974, p. 111).

Moreover, as Brown (1974, p. 112) continues, '[I]f one introduces the time element, the fallacy is compounded'. To the extent that profits are affected by the decisions of the chief executive, the effects virtually never show up during the year in which such decisions were made, and for which the profit and loss account is constructed. The chief executive may take decisions in one year. The results may not appear until several years later. The larger the organization, the longer the time span of the chief executive's discretion is likely to be. If it is decided to develop a new product line, for example, it may be some years before sales in volume result. In the intervening years the profit and loss account will include all the costs of a plan that has yet to introduce any revenue. How can it then be said that the chief executive's efforts can be assessed in terms of profits in those intervening years?

Brown (1974, pp. 112–113) argues that:

[F]allacious perceptions like this about how to assess an individual's work exist at all levels in employment hierarchies and are widespread in society. Factual results are very important, but they must be used intelligently. Their crude use as sole criteria of success not only results in injustice to individuals but can also bring about decisions that damage the future of companies.

However, he continues, if managers encourage their subordinates to discharge the tasks allotted to them by precisely cultivating and deploying their practical, situational

judgement, in for instance, deciding how best to distribute work among their own subordinates, how to devise new methods of obtaining results when normal methods have failed, how to keep things on schedule, how to deal with personnel difficulties, how to train people to do their jobs, how to match changes in the environment in which they work that no one foresaw, with initiatives that nobody ordered them to take, then the fallacy can be avoided.

[If] we realize that we have to judge subordinates on the way they use their judgment, then we will realize that *our* judgments of *their* work are based on experience over time and on our *use* of intuition and judgment. There is no easy formula. (Brown 1974, p. 114)

For Brown, an effective and equitable assessment of a subordinate's performance must of necessity be mediated by a principle of specific judgement.

It is only by considering a subordinate's work in this way that a manager can help him. It is no help to him to say: 'Your output has fallen, there must therefore be something wrong about your approach to running the factory and you must do better'. You can help him only by pointing to examples of errors or marginal errors of judgment, and to do that you must have a pretty extensive knowledge of the types of decisions that his work involves. (Brown 1974, p. 114)

As with Weber (1994), with whom, alongside Barnard, he is often compared (see Kelly 1968, Chapter 10), Brown roots almost everything to 'Fraglichkeit der situation' ('the uncertainty of the situation'). As Weber's work can be seen to reside within both a classical tradition of political judgement, and an 'ethics of office', so too can Brown's work be located within the classic stance of organizational theory as a practical science, where practical action and situational judgement are at a premium.

## Conclusion

Many of the concepts and concerns animating practitioners of what I have described as 'the classical stance' in Organizational Theory are now seen as having little explanatory 'traction' in the present, possibly because a different terminology is deemed more supple, subtle and possessing greater 'theoretical' reach (the classic focus on 'task' has been superseded by the contemporary turn to 'practice' – especially communities thereof – and 'process', for instance), or because some of its key artefacts seem so much part and parcel of the flotsam and jetsam of organizational life they no longer appear worthy of sustained discussion, even if the precision with which they are understood and used often leaves a lot to be desired ('manager', 'role', 'performance'). While many of the 'organizational reality devices' (du Gay & Vikkelsø 2012, 2013) developed by practitioners of the 'classical' stance are now deemed anachronistic, out of step with the demands of the present, it is interesting to note how they frequently appear, even if 'in mufti', in the present, not least in the context of contemporary corporate scandals and 'crises': Barnard's concern with executive 'personal responsibility' and 'purpose' finding resonance in the context of the debacles at Enron and Lehman Brothers, or, most recently, in the Parliamentary investigation into HBOS in the UK:

The corporate governance of HBOS at board level serves as a model for the future, but not in the way in which Lord Stevenson and other former Board members appear to see

it. It represents a model of self-delusion, of the triumph of process over purpose. (Parliamentary Report on Banking Standards – Fourth Report 2013)

Brown's concern with the 'judging of performance' resonating with debates about the conducts associated with 'shareholder value', and its organizational effects, and with the tension, anxiety and stress experienced by organizational members generated by contemporary performance management regimes. If the concepts and tools the classicists developed and deployed, and the concerns animating them, are often held to be out of kilter with the present, it also seems that the present cannot entirely do without them, even if this 'dependence' cannot be explicitly acknowledged, but has to take place 'in the dark', when no one is looking. This leads me to suggest, that there might be something to be gained from making that unacknowledged 'dependence' on the classic heritage more explicit. Maybe, the assumption of the present having 'moved beyond' their concerns is somewhat overblown, or even misplaced? Perhaps contemporary matters of organizational concern are not so far removed from those animating the practitioners of the classical stance? And maybe, their conceptual (and ethical) toolkit is not quite so anachronistic as we might assume? Perhaps, their highly formulated knowledge of 'what makes up good organization' (Brown 1965, p. 32) has some possible traction for us, here and now? This is a matter for future research. One final thought, though. While no one except the specialists is really any longer interested in the preambles of Stoicism, taken from Heraclitus's physics, or those of Democritean atomism, nonetheless, as attitudes or 'stances', Stoicism and Epicureanism remain very much alive. As Hadot (2009, p. 68) put it:

one must distinguish from the ideology that justified the attitude in the past, the concrete attitude that can be actualized. In order to actualize a message from Antiquity, it must be disengaged from everything that denotes its period; it must be demythologized ... One must try to go straight to the inner process, the concrete attitude it implies.

So, too with the classical stance in Organization Theory. Far too much academic attention has been spent focusing on 'the ideology' of classical organization theory and considerably less on the attitude or stance it embodies and expresses.<sup>12</sup> Like the moral schools of Antiquity, classical organization theory can be seen as an experimental laboratory, from which we can, usefully, circumstantially, apply the results today.

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## NOTES

1. Similar criticisms were also directed at the work of members of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Child 1969; Fox 1971; Silverman 1970). In his review of Miller and Rice's (1967) *Systems of Organization* in *The Sociological Review*, for example, Duncan (1968) writes of the authors 'isolation from academic sociology and the restrictive vision imposed by previous consultancy assignments' and concludes that '[I]t is important to

- distinguish between sociological problems and the problems with which managers are preoccupied. Excessive involvement with the latter inhibits clarification of the former’.
2. Well, the answer from within contemporary Organization Studies is just about anything else but that. Contemporary favourites include, inter alia, ‘assemblages’, ‘enactments of rationalized myths’ or ‘action nets’, for example. ‘
  3. Hadot (1995, Chap. 7) was no great fan of Foucault’s use of his work. He considered Foucault’s deployment of ancient philosophy to posit a contemporary ‘aesthetics of existence’ as simply ‘a new form of dandyism’.
  4. Interestingly, Hadot (1995, p. 272) reached the same conclusion, arguing that the phenomenology of Husserl appeared less as a theoretical system than as a method ‘for transforming our perception of the world’.
  5. In addition to leading New Jersey Bell Telephone from 1927, Barnard completed two terms as the head of the New Jersey Emergency Relief Administration during the Depression, ran the United Services Organization (President for three years), and the Rockefeller Foundation (President for four years) among many other organizational roles and responsibilities.
  6. Here the similarities to Weber’s work on the ‘ethics of office’, and specifically his focus on the conduct of life (*Lebensführung*) in different life orders (*Lebensordnungen*) also become apparent (du Gay 2008). Whether Barnard was at all influenced by Weber’s work is a moot point. However, it appears that he had read Weber in German (Wren 2005, p. 313).
  7. We may detect something like this of course in Ancient Philosophy as outlined by Hadot; more contemporaneously, however, it can be seen in the stance adopted by the American Pragmatists (Van Fraassen 2002, pp. 77 & 83).
  8. Alistair Mant, Draft Introduction to ‘The German Book’, No Date, The Papers of Lord Brown, Churchill Archive Centre, University of Cambridge, BRWN 4/1/1/3.
  9. Professor Leonard Sayles, ‘Report on Brown: Exploration in Management’, May 1960, The Papers of Lord Brown, Churchill Archive Centre, University of Cambridge, BRWN 4/3/1.
  10. ‘Concepts Book’, 1977, The Papers of Lord Brown, Churchill Archive Centre, University of Cambridge, BRWN 4/1/2.
  11. In a remarkable set of highly personal, and extraordinarily self-critical, unpublished typescripts concerning his own exercise of judgement, and written between February and September 1979, Brown recalls and describes in some detail a number of ‘hard cases’ he experienced at Glacier, from the earliest days of his career until his departure to join the Labour Government in the 1960s. In these notes to himself, he remorselessly puts his own organizational judgement and conduct under the microscope, indicating where, how and why he failed to live up to the ideals he publically professed, and what he felt he should have done differently under the circumstances in question. The Papers of Lord Brown, Churchill Archive Centre, University of Cambridge, BRWN 4/3/3/3-4.
  12. The manner in which Braverman’s (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* set the agenda for the understanding of the work of F. W. Taylor for a whole generation of ‘critical’ scholars of organization, would be a case in point. For a more recent text that positions the classicists in terms of ideology and power above all else, see Hoopes’s (2003) *False Prophets*.

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