Ask Not What Philosophy Can Do for Critical Management Studies

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Abstract

In seeking to re-evaluate praxis and contribute to the current Critical Management Studies (CMS) debate, this paper pursues a number of inter-related strands of scholarship. We begin by examining the nature of the ‘things’ we ostensibly do with words and invoke A.S Byatt’s novel, The Biographer’s Tale, as a vehicle for exploring academic disaffection with exclusively wordy pursuits. This leads into a discussion of the political quietism characteristic of contemporary academic life and question how this state of affairs has arisen. We discover that, among other conditions, the opposition of philosophy and action has a legacy that stretches back many centuries. Using the work of the French classicist Pierre Hadot (1995), we trace a genealogy that reveals how modern ‘philosophy’ has been systematically emptied of both the ‘love’ and the ‘wisdom’ that lie at its semantic core. Political inaction is one consequence of the rejection of philosophy as a way of life in favour of philosophical discourse. Austin’s work is pivotal to our argument, for it allows us to examine Derrida’s deconstructive reading of How To Do Things With Words and thus to ponder the kinds of (re)solutions of the praxis debate provided by this particular form of post-structural analysis. For all its penetrative subtlety and mind-altering insight, however, Derrida’s reading of Austin – and through it the broader project of deconstructionism – turns out still to be burdened by the problem of ‘modern philosophy’ as we have framed it. Is there any way back from this seeming impasse? We think so, but find ourselves looking toward the premodern and non-modern philosophies of antiquity for resolution, in particular those of Stoicism and Buddhism.

Keywords: critical management studies, philosophy, performatives, speech acts, narrative, Austin, Derrida, Hadot, premodernity, mysticism, Stoicism, neo-platonism, ethics, spirituality.

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Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one’s way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom. This is not an easy matter. (Hadot, 1995, p.275).

Introduction

Embedded within our title is a thinly veiled allusion to Austin’s seminal book on language philosophy, *How To Do Things With Words*, our intention being here to examine the *performative* nature of organization theory and philosophy. We seek to challenge the presumption that philosophy of organization is some form of adjunct to ‘real’ philosophical endeavour that, by this implied division of labour, must be being expedited by others in a different time and space. Those of us engaged in the philosophy of organization are likely to suffer from a form of guilt or envy deriving from an uneasy sense that, ‘Real Philosophers don’t read Mintzberg.’ To remedy this dis-ease, a performatively reconstructed philosophy would strive not simply to position itself as a legitimate *intellectual* endeavour for CMS scholars but to find ways of making philosophy *co-nascent with or immanent to* acts of organizing. Marxists have, of course, long insisted that everyday action should ideally be a form of praxis: a healthy commingling of theoretical reflection and practice based on the dialectical principles of economic materialism. Our purpose, however, is to probe the meaning of praxis in what is now a post-Marxist intellectual climate and explore alternative possibilities for philosophy-as-practice through a questioning of the assumptions that have, historically, facilitated a facile and harmful theory-practice duality.

In seeking to re-evaluate praxis and contribute to the current CMS debate, this paper pursues a number of inter-related strands of scholarship. We begin by examining the nature of the ‘things’ we ostensibly do with words and invoke A.S Byatt’s novel, *The Biographer’s Tale*, as a vehicle for exploring academic disaffection with exclusively wordy pursuits. This leads into a discussion of the political quietism characteristic of contemporary academic life and question how this state of affairs has arisen. We
discover that, among other conditions, the opposition of philosophy and action has a legacy that stretches back many centuries. Using the work of the French classicist Pierre Hadot (1995), we trace a genealogy that reveals how modern ‘philosophy’ has been systematically emptied of both the ‘love’ and the ‘wisdom’ that lie at its semantic core. Political inaction is one consequence of the rejection of philosophy as a way of life in favour of philosophical discourse. Philosophy qua *philosophia*, we contend, finds its nemesis in the guise of analytic philosophy. This understanding, based on etymological inquiry, permits us to frame Austin’s project – the close interrogation of speech-acts - as an attenuated reaction to problems faced by his contemporary ‘professional philosophers’. Austin’s work is pivotal to our argument, for it allows us to examine Derrida’s deconstructive reading of *How To Do Things With Words* and thus to ponder the kinds of (re)solutions of the praxis debate provided by this particular form of post-structural analysis. En route we also offer a conjecture as to why Austin’s work has attracted the broadly appreciative attentions of such thinkers as Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari. To our great surprise, Austin exhibits certain Nietzschean inclinations. For all its penetrative subtlety and mind-altering insight, however, Derrida’s reading of Austin – and through it the broader project of deconstructionism – turns out still to be burdened by the problem of ‘modern philosophy’ as we have framed it. *Différance*, in its marginal staking out of the excluded middle and deconstruction of the autonomous self, appears intolerant to the possibility of intentional human action and – quite in line with its own premises and intellectual ambitions – leaves begging the question of ‘what is to be done?’ Is there any way back from this seeming impasse? We think so, but find ourselves looking toward the premodern and non-modern philosophies of antiquity for resolution, in particular those of Stoicism and Buddhism. These alternative perspectives allow us to conceive of differing discourses of ‘truth’ and to construe an embodied ethics based on the reinstated virtues of ‘love’ and ‘wisdom’. We find parallels (along with principled differences) between our proposals and the ethical conclusions arrived at by inter alia Hadot (1995), McGhee (2000), MacIntyre (1985) and Shusterman (1997).
Now There’s a Thing

Who among us professional academics has not, at some point in her or his career, stopped to ponder the worth of their contribution to the world? For most, we suspect, there occur many profound moments of self-doubt and a sense of ennui that follows from a life dedicated in large measure to abstraction and acts of representation. We find ourselves in seemingly interminable language games of various sorts: examining, interrogating, analysing, evaluating or criticising this or that text; challenging and probing, deconstructing, engaging in ironic revelation of sub-text, unconscious or hidden motive in the works and espousals of this or that author, practitioner, ‘research subject’ or ‘respondent’. In this respect, many of us would doubtless be able to empathise with Phineas G. Nanson, the main protagonist in A.S. Byatt’s novel, *The Biographer’s Tale*, who, having had an epiphany in the middle of a Lacanian seminar, decides to forsake literary theory in favour of an imagined life grounded in the certainty of facts and *things*. ‘I’ve decided to give it all up,’ he informs his intellectual mentor, Ormerod Goode, ‘I’ve decided I don’t want to be a postmodern literary theorist’ (2000, p.3). Phineas goes on:

‘I felt an urgent need for a life full of *things*.’ I was pleased with the safe, solid Anglo-Saxon word. I had avoided the trap of talking about ‘reality’ and ‘unreality’ for I knew very well that postmodernist literary theory could be described as a reality. People lived in it... ‘I need a life full of *things,*’ I said. ‘Full of facts.’ ‘Facts,’ said Ormerod Goode... ‘The richness,’ he said, ‘the surprise, the shining *solidity* of a world full of facts.’ (*Ibid.*, p.4, original emphases).

As the novel unfolds we find that, despite Phineas’s sincere aspirations, he is drawn back inexorably from the world of things by the gravitational pull of his own intellectual proclivities and, far from locating the security he craves, he starts a doctoral dissertation on the life of an obscure biographer, Scholes Destiny-Scholes, whose world seems full of the facts and things he covets. With Phineas choosing a vicarious life over his own, the search for reality gets rapidly and reflexively
sublimated into the task of re-searching the biography of a biographer. He never completes the thesis (at least not in the pages of the novel) and is frustrated in virtually every attempt to locate facts about Destry-Scholes.

It is not a hopeful story, in part because its multiple tiers of representational reflexivity have an alienative and de-centring effect in Byatt’s hands. There is a lengthy subplot, for example, involving forged fragments of Linnaeus’s taxonomical writing that sees Phineas lured inexorably away from his espoused quest for ‘things.’ The introduction of heterosexual love interest does little to mitigate this sense of alienation as there is, at best, only ever a partial connection between the protagonist and his two lovers. Encounter, too, is actually simulacra. At the end of the novel we find Phineas occupying a pastoral idyll of sorts but one that is heavily burdened with taxonomical perception (he has a label for every plant and insect specimen he comes across) and, to that extent, one from which he is destined always to be separate.

Byatt’s novel resonates with our purposes here in two ways. Firstly, her evocation of the Anglo-Saxon word ‘thing’ is germane to our interest in what philosophy and words can or cannot do and, secondly, Phineas’ discontents and aspirations testify to a broader ‘problem with philosophy’ that we shall be at pains to expose. Byatt employs the term ‘thing’ in its familiar contemporary form to connote the facticity or objective existence of individual entities. This is all well and good but, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the first category of definitions of this semantically rich word derives from its Nordic and Saxon origins and holds ‘thing’ to mean, ‘A meeting, assembly, *esp.* a deliberative or judicial assembly, a court, a council’ (1961, Vol. XI, p.308). The earliest usage of the word dates from the seventh century and is evidently the source of later semantic accretions that denote inter alia, ‘A matter brought before a court of law, a legal process… an affair, business, concern, matter… That which is done or to be done; a doing, act, deed, transaction… a fact, circumstance, experience… That which is said; a saying, utterance, expression, statement; with various connotations, e.g., a charge or accusation made against a person, a story, tale; a part or section of an argument or discourse; a witty saying, a jest (usu. good thing)’ (*ibid.*, p.308, original emphases).
We conjecture that this semantic detail would not have escaped J.L. Austin’s attention, particularly given his professional interest in jurisprudence. If correct in our speculation, then Austin displays a remarkable degree of wit and reflexivity in choosing to entitle his ordinary language investigations, *How To Do Things With Words*. The immanent tautology of what Austin refers to as performative speech-acts – whereby the saying *is* the doing – is already present in his choice of title, whereby the ‘doing’, the ‘thing’ and the ‘words’ are all substitutes for one another. This archly reflexive move immediately fuses word, deed and judgement in ‘things.’ What an odd predicament poor Phineas could have been in had someone pointed out to him the wider semantic implications of his desire to escape academia in favour of a ‘a world full of things.’ Perhaps he fulfilled his ambition after all.

In telling us that the doing of things is immanent in the very words we utter as part of everyday discourse, however, Austin unwittingly harbours a powerful (and intellectually appealing) conceit. His ‘ordinary language’ project gives us free philosophical licence, as it were, to sit around in cosy armchairs, ponder the various contextual nuances of words and feel satisfied that we thereby gain a genuine philosophical perspective on the organization and practical accomplishment of the human world. That this is an attractive prospect can hardly be contested, for, under the custodianship of one of his students, John Searle (see, Searle, 1977), Austin’s work spawned an entire school of analytic-orientated philosophy. Indeed, Speech-Act Theory has turned into an intellectual industry that Austin himself could hardly have anticipated and of which he probably would not have approved.

In his 1888 ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, XI, Marx (1975, p.423) remarked that, ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it’ (original emphases). With his pursuit of ever-finer gradations and logical qualifications of speech-acts one would be hard pressed to find a more precise interpreter of the world than Austin. At a superficial level, at least, the very last thing one would expect to come from his project is a radical political agenda.
CMS and Political Quietism

The political quietism of academic preoccupations and pursuits, of the sort epitomised by Austin’s work, appears to be a cause for considerable concern for one of CMS’s most vocal proponents. Martin Parker’s (2002) *Against Management* sets out a series of anxieties about the CMS project in general and the potential impotence of the critique generated by those who subscribe to its manifesto. He reveals, perhaps predictably, that CMS is a broad church encompassing a number of heterogeneous activities, some of which stretch credulity in terms of their espoused criticality. In arriving at a general conception of CMS, however, Parker draws on the helpful survey of the literature undertaken by Sotirin and Tyrell (1998) to characterise a body of work that is: critical of instrumentality; reflexive about the use of methods and acts of representation; suspicious of the Enlightenment project and the evolution of modernity; suspicious of globalisation; questions the dominant pedagogy and management curriculum emanating from North America, and; critically evaluates the appeal of much management ‘guru’ and populist writing. Parker also cites the tripartite scheme set out in Fournier and Grey (2000) in which CMS is seen to embody three broad qualities: (1) it eschews managerialist performativity; (2) it ‘denaturalizes’ and historicizes commonly held and taken for granted assumptions in organizations, such as, the managers’ prerogative to manage, the privileging of the profit motive, the ‘efficiency’ imperative, and so forth; and (3) it is reflexive about its own epistemology and methodology and seeks to qualify claims to knowledge accordingly.

Having set out the CMS stall, Parker identifies certain key criticisms that have been levelled against the project by traditional Marxist labour process theorists. For instance, from the labour process perspective CMS academics constitute a rather motley bunch of misguided, revisionist post-structuralists and post-modernists who are blind to the true nature of the employment relation under capitalism and have so deconstructed the world of organization that they no longer think in terms of the structural realities of employer-employee, manager-managed, oppression-emancipation, and so forth. The CMS project is thus accused of having backed itself
into a corner from which, ‘through its sustained intellectual hypochondria,’ it is unable, ‘to articulate a political position’ and has ‘disqualified all the grounds for judgement’ (2000, p.126). Responding to these objections from the labour process camp, Parker is careful to point out that a post-structural revision of Marxism does not necessarily entail the end of politics per se; merely the end of representation politics of the form that promised mass emancipation. In its place comes a commitment to personal politics of a more modest and local form. Although academically balanced, the sentiments Parker expresses in this regard are not entirely convincing. One infers from his argument here and elsewhere in the book that he still harbours some considerable frustration over the fact that CMS academics seem impotent in the face of those obnoxious organizational regimes and practices that is their critical target. As he graphically puts it:

In a way that echoes the intense sectarianism of the left more generally - critical academics have been busily worrying about epistemology while Seattle was burning. (Ibid., p.125).

Parker explains the political quietism of CMS academics in terms of their having been, in effect, co-opted by the system. He rightly indicates that, ‘they are usually employees of large organizations who are paid a salary to engage in administration, the dissemination of canonical knowledge, and the production of highly specialist training for very specific audiences’ (ibid., p.190). In this regard, academics have no more incentive to cause trouble or effect radical change to extant systems of social relations than do managers working for commercial corporations. Like those of managers, academics’ salaries depend to a large extent on the preservation of the status quo. A second important point made by Parker is that institutions of higher education worldwide are becoming increasingly corporate in the way they are constituted and run. They operate using performative managerial resource models that enable the close monitoring of expenditure in relation to teaching and research output (numbers of successful graduates, quantity and quality of publication, etc). Where deemed expedient, cost reduction measures are introduced, such as, employing part-time and contract teaching and outsourcing support services (printing, catering and so forth). These functional procedures are all carefully monitored through systems of budgetary control, financial audit and quality assurance mechanisms. Academics also
have to tout for business in open markets. They are required to compete with each
other in order to recruit students to courses, to place their research publications and to
secure funding from various grant bodies. Held taught in these multiples cross-wires,
academics are more readily positioned and manipulated by university managers, with
the result that any aspiring radicalism is kept well in check. Such reasoning leads
Parker to the pessimistic conclusion that the revolution is unlikely to be sparked by
academics of the CMS or any other variety in the foreseeable future. Their thorough
co-optation means that theory is safely insulated from the contamination of political
practice. In this regard, he quotes Kierkegaard’s sardonic comment on the intellectual
whose, ‘ability, virtuosity and good sense consists in trying to reach a judgement and
a decision without ever going so far as action’ (ibid., p.193).

*Philosophia and the Bifurcation of Reason and Practice*

Although we acknowledge and appreciate the power of the systemic economic and
social factors that Parker identifies as contributing to political quietism, we suggest
that the separation of thought and action, reason and practice (which, after all,
Kierkegaard is able to allude to in a time relatively removed from our own) has roots
that extend far deeper than the recent marketisation of academic life. Present
corporatist tendencies may well further reinforce the pattern, but to uncover its origins
we need to adopt nothing less than a millennial perspective on the question. One such
perspective comes from the French classicist Pierre Hadot, whose collection of
essays, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, sheds a great deal of light on this central issue of
praxis and the relationship between philosophy and action.

Hadot (1995) argues convincingly that modern philosophy conveys a meaning that is
considerably removed from its ancient Greek origins. The word _________ (L.
philosophia) - a concatenation of _____ (L. philo) and _____ (L. sophia) meaning
literally ‘love’ and ‘wisdom’ respectively - originated in Greece in around the sixth or
fifth century BC. It was in the writings of Plato that the term took on its strongest
sense as the ‘love of wisdom,’ that is, the passionate pursuit of self-transcending
virtue and knowledge. Hadot makes much of the philosopher (philosophers) who,
according to the Socratic dictum ‘Know Thyself’ is, ‘someone on the way toward
What is particularly intriguing and original about Hadot’s account of *philosophia*’s development is his repeated insistence that mediaeval Scholasticism, with its rediscovery of ancient Greek texts in the twelfth century, was responsible for a widespread *mis*-rendering of philosophy’s purpose; one that systematically overlooked the practical *spiritual* dimension that, he contends, is integral to the Greek conception of philosophy and without which it reduces to mere logos. Of course, ancient Greek philosophies were quite diverse and sometimes contradictory. What Hadot argues by recourse to an impressive body of scholastic evidence, however, is that, despite the surface heterogeneity, each philosophical form carried at its heart a set of spiritual exercises that aimed at transforming the *practitioner* of the philosophy. This is true of Aristotelian, Platonic, Stoic, Epicurean and Neo-Platonic systems. Through the pursuit of various virtues and systematic meditations on actions of mind (conscience), word and deed, the *philosophos* was able to approach momentary self-transcendence and the apprehension of intuitive cosmic understanding. To quote Hadot at some length on this important point:

> Philosophy in antiquity was an exercise practiced at each instant. It invites us to concentrate on each instant of life, to become aware of the infinite value of each present moment, once we have replaced it within the perspective of the cosmos. The exercise of wisdom entails a cosmic dimension. Whereas the average person has lost touch with the world, and does not see the world qua world, but rather treats the world as a means of satisfying his desires, the sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to mind. He thinks and acts within a cosmic perspective. He has the feeling of belonging to a whole which goes beyond the limits of his individuality… [C]osmic consciousness was the result of a spiritual exercise within the great current of the cosmos and the perspective of the whole, *toti se inserens mundo*, in the words of Seneca. This exercise was situated not in the absolute space of exact science, but in the lived experience of the concrete, living, and perceiving subject. (Ibid., p.273).

One of the lines of investigation pursued by Hadot is an exploration of the historical currents that precipitated and reinforced the divorce between reason and practice that the modern world inherited. A pivotal factor, he maintains, is the influence of the Christian church. The advent of institutionalised Christianity in around the second
century AD resulted in a conflict between it and philosophies of the ancient world. Christianity wanted to present itself as a way of life that would replace those based on the Greek practices. As Hadot has it, ‘If philosophy was to live in conformity with the law of reason… the Christian was a philosopher, since he (sic) lived in conformity with the law of the Logos – divine reason’ (ibid., p.269). Accordingly, authors of the Christian gospels appropriated cosmological elements of ancient Greek philosophy and, similarly, Christian monasticism adapted the Stoico-Platonic spiritual exercises associated with: attention to oneself, meditation, reflections on conscience and training oneself for the moment of death (practices know collectively as prosoche). While philosophia in the monastic traditions did not lose its connotation of living practice, Hadot contends that quite a different development occurred with the advent of institutional learning and the emergence of universities in Europe during the Middle Ages:

With the advent of medieval Scholasticism… we find a clear distinction being drawn between theologia and philosophia. Theology became conscious of its autonomy qua supreme science, while philosophy was emptied of its spiritual exercises which, from now on, were relegated to Christian mysticism and ethics. Reduced to a ‘handmaid of theology,’ philosophy’s role was henceforth to furnish theology with conceptual – and hence purely theoretical – material. (Ibid., original emphases, p.107).

This line of analysis leads Hadot to conclude that the ascent of a modern independent philosophy in the Enlightenment period – typified in the works of inter alia Wolff, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel – was already prefigured by the mediaeval bifurcation of theory and practice; the ‘natural’ separation of thought and action. It is a legacy, moreover, that has persisted through to our own era. Writing in the mid ’seventies, Hadot suggests that contemporary philosophy continues this trend. He finds exceptions to the rule only in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger and Sartre, who each in their own way seek to reinstate the importance of living a philosophical life. We are tempted to suggest, in fact, that contemporary analytic philosophy represents the absolute nemesis of ________, void as it appears to be of any semblance of either ‘love’ or ‘wisdom’ and operating in a realm that is conspicuously specialised and remote from life. This is not to deny analytic
philosophy as a form of life for those engaged in it but merely to point out that it seems far removed from the ideals of ancient Greeks and philosophy as the living pursuit of the virtuous. Hadot makes much of the Stoical distinction between discourse about philosophy and philosophy itself. In other words, the acquisition of ideas that inform philosophy which may be categorised into differing parts – for the Stoics these would have included physics, ethics and logic – should be contrasted with the practice of philosophy that reveals, through transformational experience, the living unity and reality of these diverse ideas. His point is that modernity has become enamoured of philosophical discourse to the complete exclusion, one might say systematic marginalisation, of philosophical practice. Philosophy is rendered purely as an exegetical exercise that focuses on texts and the representation of ideas.

In short, philosophy in antiquity was never a purely cerebral or ideational endeavour, as it has widely become during the intervening centuries. As Hadot asserts, ‘Ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists’ (ibid., p.272).

Reading Austin

Having outlined Hadot’s sweeping historical critique of philosophy’s development, we are now better positioned to assess Austin’s contribution and, in light of Parker’s assessment, prepare the way for a re-evaluation of what philosophy might (not) do for CMS. How To Do Things With Words comes out of a tradition of English language philosophy whose purpose is to examine the semantics and veracity of propositions. As such, it exemplifies precisely Hadot’s thesis concerning the spiritual denuding of modern philosophy and the abandonment of philosophia. For philosophy within this tradition is almost exclusively concerned with the relatively arid task of establishing the meaning of statements (considered exclusively in terms of their sense and reference) and the truth or falsity of their claims. That said, Austin’s work can be interpreted as rebelling against language philosophy’s neglect of the social context of language use. He attempts to recover the many functions of statements and utterances that lie outside the bounds of strict tests of veracity or which do not readily lend
themselves to analysis through propositional logic. As Austin put it, ‘In real life, as opposed to the simple situations envisaged in logical theory, one cannot always answer in a simple manner whether [a statement] is true or false’ (*ibid.*, p.143). Austin’s great innovation, therefore, was the recognition that ‘natural language’ functions within social contexts not simply to describe the external world but to connote and invoke attitudes and actions toward that world. To this extent, at least, he was engaged in a sincere effort to reconnect philosophy with lived experience. It is a move, however, that is not without irony. What immediately strikes one whilst reading *How To Do Things With Words* is that, for all its espoused interest in ‘ordinary language’, Austin never actually examines naturally occurring utterances, preferring to stick with stylised forms of ‘speech’ that lend themselves to philosophical analysis (see Case, 1995).

In the first half of *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin seeks to explore whether or not it is possible, in a systematic and sustainable way, to discriminate between constative statements – utterances which purport to describe factual (true or false) conditions in the world – and performatives, that is, statements which do not possess truth value as such but which accomplish something in their very utterance. Examples that Austin becomes preoccupied with are such expressions as, ‘I promise’, ‘I name this ship the Mr Stalin’, ‘I do’ as uttered in a marriage ceremony. In the preliminary stages of the book he identifies three sets of conditions necessary for the effective accomplishment of a speech-act. The first two sets of criteria relate broadly to public expression, the remaining one to private intention (although he acknowledges that even this preliminary structural distinction turns out to be rather unsteady.) For a performative to be successfully enacted, he suggests:

(A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,
(A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
(B.2) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and (B.2) completely.
Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings [as, e.g., in a marriage ceremony], or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.

Now if we sin against any one (or more) of these six rules, our performative utterance will be (in one way or another) unhappy. (Austin, 1976, pp.14-15).

Austin proceeds in the minute evaluation of a host of examples of performative utterances using these criteria, in an attempt to establish whether or not, in each selected case, the performative is ‘happy’ (as opposed to ‘unhappy’) or ‘felicitous’ (as opposed to ‘infelicitous’). En route he finds himself running down all manner of cul de sacs and needing further to qualify or refine his evaluative scheme. The effect this has is to draw the reader into world of ever-finer determinations and logical precision. What appears to be a relatively innocuous expression, for example, ‘I promise,’ turns out to invoke a plethora of social-psychological conditions of increasing subtlety. Then, to the reader’s surprise, a little over half way through the book Austin abruptly drops his initial search for binding necessary conditions that separate constative from performative. He concludes that the distinction is unsustainable and is faced with the realisation that all utterances have a performative content. As Austin puts it:

When we issue any utterance whatsoever, are we not ‘doing something’? Certainly the ways in which we talk about ‘action’ are liable here, as elsewhere, to be confusing. For example, we may contrast men of words with men of action, we may say they did nothing, only talked or said things: yet again, we may contrast only thinking something with actually saying it (out loud), in which context saying it is doing something. (Ibid., p.92).

This is a seminal moment that has since reverberated throughout the contemporary philosophical world. For in this realisation, Austin makes of performatives qua ethics a kind of philosophical synecdoche. It becomes impossible to speak in any context, philosophical or otherwise, without simultaneously implicating oneself or others in
some form of performative (and hence ethical) nexus. An observation of this nature, made in the philosophical world of 1950s Oxford, preoccupied as it was with the traditions of English empiricism and analytic language philosophy, marked a daring departure from ‘the norm.’ In contrast to the Oxford traditions, here was a framework that seemed to be inclining toward the despised ‘pragmatism’ of North American language philosophy or even, in its implied challenge to the fundamental assumptions of prepositional logic, suggestive of certain Nietzschean elements of thought. Little wonder that he chose to make his revelations in a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University.

Following his insight into the active nature of all utterances, Austin feels compelled to drop the constative-performative structure and develops in its place an alternative conceptual scheme for performatives that entails distinguishing between: (1) locutionary acts which consist in utterances that have ‘meaning’ in a conventional language philosophic sense, that is, they possess sense and reference; (2) illocutionary acts that have some form of immanent conventional force, such as, actions of commanding, warning, promising, apologising, and so forth; and (3) perlocutionary acts which classify the effects brought about in an audience by performative utterances – convincing, persuading, surprising, misleading, and so on. Following the introduction of this taxonomy, Austin almost immediately begins detracting from it by teasing out subtle marginal conditions where the categories overlap, seem unstable or otherwise capitulate. The entire project takes on a reasoned hesitancy and ‘provisionality.’ This is not to say that Austin has abandoned the notion of truth entirely; far from it. He admits himself to be driven by a ‘fetish’ for both the familiar truth/falsity and fact/value distinctions of contemporary philosophy, but it is clear that the force of his own reasoning leads him to discover how even these seemingly immutable structures may be caused to wobble slightly.

Given the destabilising direction of Austin’s reasoning, it is perhaps unsurprising that his project has attracted the attention and appreciation of a number of continental European philosophers. Of particular relevance to our argument is Derrida’s critique of How To Do Things With Words and it is to his deconstructive reading of Austin that we now turn. This reading enables us to erect a temporary staging post from
which to return to the question of praxis and a further consideration of how the dualities of theory-practice, philosophy-action might be reinterpreted.

Reading Derrida Reading Austin

[A]ll the difficulties encountered by Austin in an analysis that is patient, open, aporetic, in constant transformation, often more fruitful in the recognition of its impasses than in its positions, seem to me to have a common root. It is this: Austin has not taken into account that which in the structure of locution (and therefore before any illocutory or perlocutory determination) already bears within itself the system of predicates that I call graphematic in general, which therefore confuse all the ulterior oppositions whose pertinence, purity, and rigor Austin sought to establish in vain. (Derrida, 1982, p.322, original emphases).

This quotation from Derrida’s essay, ‘Signature, Event, Context,’ goes to the heart of his deconstruction of Austin’s investigations in How To Do Things With Words. It is, however, a somewhat dense passage and would perhaps benefit from a little expository unpacking. Insofar as the notion of the performative questions the ‘unquestionable’ authority of the true/false opposition, Derrida considers Austin’s challenge to the orthodoxy of analytic language philosophy to be ‘nothing less than Nietzschean’ (ibid., p. 322). It is not difficult to see how this intellectual gesture of Austin’s resonates with the deconstructive enterprise and hence attracts Derrida’s appreciation. As may be seen from the above quotation, however, Derrida is at pains to push the challenge further and to liberate Austin’s ‘performative’ problematic from the bonds of locutionary sense and reference which still tie it to conventional conceptions of the ‘philosophical task.’ He does this is a series of moves that are concerned with graphematic structure and which are based essentially on arguments concerning the status and operation of ‘writing’ (écriture) first presented by Derrida in Of Grammatology (1967/1976) and later elaborated and discussed through a series of interviews collected in Positions (1972/1987).
Insofar as writing is representative, Derrida maintains, it inexorably invokes absence. Indeed, writing is only possible because there is *implied* absence in any representative presence. Any message represented may, in principle, be read by different recipients in different contexts and hence implies both an absence of those others (who are not co-present in its writing) and an absence of the author in its reading and interpretation. Derrida refers to this immanent transferability of writing as its ‘iterability’ (a word deriving etymologically from the Sanskrit *itara*, meaning ‘other.’) The concept of iterability and its operation may be illustrated by reflecting on the process of drawing up a shopping list for ‘oneself.’ The act of writing the list requires one to imagine, as it were, a future self (an-other) who, by definition, is currently absent (why else would the list be necessary?) but who will nonetheless be present to read the note when doing the shopping. This example thus demonstrates how writing consists in marks – graphemes – that endure or ‘remain’ and which have the inherent capacity to break free of their context of origin. A necessary condition for the possibility of writing is that marks may become detached from the present and singular intention of their production. It is a structural feature of writing that all signs imply absence and all signs may be cited. Moreover, this metaphysical dimension of writing extends also to speech, whose very possibility, Derrida famously and controversially asserts, owes itself to ‘writing’ qua *écriture*; for when he evokes writing he means a great deal more than the conventional understanding of alphabetic marks on paper. In other words, writing – in this technical sense – precedes speech. As he states:

This is the possibility on which I wish to insist: the possibility of extraction and of citational grafting which belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and which constitutes every mark as writing *even before and outside every horizon of semiolinguistic communication*; as writing, that is, as a possibility of functioning cut off, at a certain point, from its ‘original’ meaning and from its belonging to a saturable and constraining context. (*Ibid.*, p.320, added emphases).

According to Derrida, Austin has not comprehended this fundamental quality of writing and hence is trapped into pursuing an examination of speech-acts that falsely require, as a condition of their felicitous or happy enactment, the existence of a bounded context and *intentional actor* (consider Austin’s preoccupation with
examples of the first person, singular, indicative, active grammatical forms – ‘I promise,’ ‘I apologise,’ etc.) Derrida is essentially accusing Austin of chasing a proverbial red herring, since speech-acts are, in an important sense, free floating and not tied to intentionality in the way Austin imagines. For Austin, the failure of any given performative – its prospective ‘unhappiness’ – is an ever-present threat, whereas for Derrida it is also a condition of its possibility. So while Austin (1976, p.104) seeks to exclude what he sees as ‘parasitic’ forms of speech-act as they occur in poetry, fiction, theatre, jest, deception, quoting, etc., these are precisely the cases that Derrida finds interesting because they display, par excellence, the inevitable and vital operation of ‘iterability.’ These marginalized examples entail citation and the non-presence of the intentional speaking subject, whether on stage, screen or in a poem. For Derrida, the marginal parasitic cases that Austin excludes are indicative of how all performatives work, that is, by invoking ritualised social contexts in which sheer citation will operate to bring about its effect. There is no need to invoke the existence of a spontaneous intentional subject under this analysis. Moreover, the graphematic structure of signs entails that the very notion of locution that prefigures illocution and perlocution in Austin’s scheme, is itself questionable and, along with it, all the premises of true/false, fact/value, happy/unhappy, felicitous/infelicitous oppositions that form the axes of his philosophical problematic and which, as it were, authorise his inquiry.

Deconstruction and Buddhism?

Derrida’s critique of Austin provides an entrée into a wider consideration of the deconstructive project and the implications that it carries for the re-evaluation of praxis. His ‘Signature, Event, Context’ essay concludes with a generic statement of deconstruction as a radicalising philosophy which,

[C]annot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes,
which is also a field of nondiscursive forces. (1982, p.329, original emphases).

This is Derrida expressing clearly the political intent informing deconstruction\(^{11}\). It is a recognition that the various systemic inequities and other moral absurdities that result from human acts of organizing stem from what become, in their ‘writing,’ unchallengeable logocentric hierarchies. The non-conceptual, or ‘nondiscursive’ as he has it, is inextricably bound up in the conceptual and hence ‘overturning’ oppositional structures through deconstruction by necessity entails the ‘displacement’ of the naturalised order and the realisation of new forms of life. For Derrida, therefore, the very framing of our question concerning praxis is misplaced. To persist in opposing ‘theory and practice’ or ‘philosophy and action’ is to be trapped by an historically contingent set of oppositional delusions. Deconstruction demands that we break free from all such delusion by engaging critically in the staking out of middle territories that have, hitherto, been logically excluded by millenia of dualistic misconception. Preoccupation by those excluded middles, moreover, necessitates the dissolution of oppositional polarities that were responsible for their marginalisation in the first place. In this sense, deconstruction qua philosophy is politics, is praxis.

Such equations as these have led Christina Howells (1999, p. 71) to describe Derrida’s philosophy and writing as itself ‘performative.’ Strange, however, that the term first coined by Austin in a book that embodies so perfectly the rarefied world of Oxford scholarship of the 1950s; a world of afternoon tea, cucumber sandwiches and cricket; a world seemingly insulated from the harsh realities of political life, should be used to characterise so profoundly radical and politically destabilising a project as Derrida’s ‘deconstruction.’ Or is it so strange? Earlier in this paper, we alluded to a form of philosophical conceit that accompanies Austin’s project; one that is evinced even in the very title, How To Do Things With Words. The conceit is that ‘things’ can be done with words, with the corresponding implication that one can, as it were, start a revolution from one’s academic bed\(^{12}\). We also used the fictional experience of Phineas G. Nanson from Byatt’s Biographer’s Tale to invoke the ennui and disaffection that can follow from a life dedicated exclusively to ‘postmodern literary criticism’ and to point up the compensatory thirst for ‘things’ and ‘facts’ that can develop from the lack of a centre to such a life. Two important questions suggest
themselves as a consequence of this discussion: (1) does Derrida’s deconstructive project genuinely escape philosophical conceit of the form that we have alluded to, and; (2) does it offer a satisfying way of being in world - one that would, hypothetically, address Phineas’s existential longings?

‘Parts’ of the authors responsible for this paper harbour doubts with respect to both questions. By way of adumbrating these concerns, we shall draw on a non-western philosophical framework, that of Theravāda Buddhism, to reinterpret deconstruction’s ambitions and ethics. The comparison yields some interesting similarities and dissimilarities that might prompt further reflection and discussion.

Unlike many modern western philosophies which, in general, take Truth to be a monadic quality of the universe standing in opposition to Falsity, Buddhism adopts a more perspectival approach to questions of veracity (see Case, 2004). It identifies three forms of truth corresponding to three forms of reality: (1) conventional truths (voh ra-sacca in Pali) that relate to consensus reality as socially conditioned and constructed; (2) so called ‘ultimate’ truths pertaining to ultimate reality (paramattha-dhamma_), which reduce human experience to constituent phenomenological events and processes of consciousness, and; (3) nibbāna or Nirvāna (Skt.) which refers to an intuitive experience of truth and reality that transcends duality and representation (and, in so doing, is said to remove all the personal suffering that results from attachment to conventional things.)

Although forms (2) and (3) are immanent in (1), Buddhism maintains that it makes no sense to conflate the three. Form (3) is literally unspeakable. It is beyond representational duality and therefore by definition ineffable. Investigation of form (2) through meditative discipline and practice reveals that the conventions of form (1) are illusory; that selves, authors, personal intention, trees, mountains, cars, organizations, management, critique, writing are not sustainable or meaningful categories. All that exists in form (2) are transient sensory phenomena, reducible to bare serial experiences of shape and colour, sound, taste, touch and a complex host of psychological concomitants (of which volition, feeling, perception and representational thought would be discernable elements.) All these phenomena, moreover, are entirely ephemeral and void of self. Repeated and patient meditative observation of experience with respect to form (2) in time prepares the
mind for a mystical realisation of form (3) – nibb_\textit{na} – which is the ultimate purpose of life, according to Buddhist teachings.

If we approach Derrida’s project from the Buddhist perspective, deconstruction and \textit{diff\textegrance} are methods of critical investigation that enable philosophers to achieve a type of intellectual transcendence of duality reminiscent of the Buddhist form (3) outlined above. Deconstruction shares with Buddhism a desire to undermine and be rid of improper dualistic oppositions but, of course, its purpose in so doing could not in any way be described as courting the mystical, as is the case in Buddhist practice. In a sense such marginalisation of the mystical by a contemporary philosophy – such as that of Derrida – is, if we accept the critique offered by Hadot, an inevitable consequence of the demise of \textit{philosophia}. Whereas Buddhism, like the Greek philosophies of antiquity in Hadot’s account, embodies a comprehensive philosophical \textit{way of life} that embraces ethical discipline, meditation and wisdom, it would seem that deconstruction is \textit{principally} a rigorous intellectual pursuit, albeit one – for those who truly embrace it – that demands opening up to and navigating painful personal transitions. Although generative of insight, deconstruction does not aspire to offer unambiguous guidance on how to live or how to act. How could it? To do so would constitute a denial not only of its own deconstructive ‘principles’ but also of the conditions of its own emergence. Although breaking radically with certain traditions within modern western philosophy, Derrida’s project owes its existence to those same traditions (in the way that postmodern architecture owes much to modernism) and hence it should be unsurprising that a degree of (post)structural resemblance has survived the rupture.

\textbf{Conclusion: Ask Not What Philosophy Can Do for CMS}

So where does this leave our investigation of praxis? Can we enter into a performative philosophical life that re-engages \textit{philosophia} and avoids indulging the seductive philosophical conceits that would have us merely ‘do things with words’ or believe in the autonomy of ‘things’ and ‘words?’ One resolution may be through deconstruction, whose critical purpose equates challenges to logocentrism with politics and which denies the meaningful opposition of philosophy and practice, thought and action. As
we have seen, however, there may be practical ethical limitations to this project for those seeking relatively unambiguous answers to the question, ‘how should I act?’ One alternative would be to draw lessons from premodern and non-modern forms of philosophical life. This is the direction taken by Hadot (1995), McGhee (2000) and MacIntyre (1985) who, drawing on classical scholarship in their different ways, each emphasise the importance of leading a virtuous life based on reasoned moral principles. In order for this to be possible, however, we have to reinstate or accept the meaningful operation of conventional terms. We would need to speak (albeit approximately and provisionally) in terms of ‘individuals’ who possess ‘intention’ and who are able to ‘act’ in pursuit of the virtuous.

These assumptions are explicit in Hadot’s work, for example, when he concludes that, ‘Ancient philosophical traditions can provide guidance in our relationship to ourselves, to the cosmos, and to other human beings’ (1995, p. 274). He refutes readings of ancient philosophies that accuse them of tending toward solipsism and self-indulgence. On the contrary, the philosophies of antiquity were group practices (he cites Pythagorean communities, Platonic love, Epicurean friendship and Stoic spiritual direction as examples) that in each case established clear duties for practitioners in relation to maintaining the welfare of the community. In particular, he singles out Stoicism as a potential model for the pursuit of virtue within contemporary western society, its three ethical prescriptions being to: (a) maintain moment-to-moment vigilance and restraint with respect to one’s thoughts; (b) consent to events imposed by destiny, and; (c) act in the service of the human community in accordance with justice. Hadot offers the following pragmatic advice and reflection for those seeking to reconcile the tensions caused by trying to develop personal wisdom while living and acting in a world of suffering and injustice:

[T]he philosophical life normally entails a communitary (sic) engagement. This last is probably the hardest part to carry out. The trick is to maintain oneself on the level of reason, and not allow oneself to be blinded by political passions, anger, resentments, or prejudices. To be sure, there is an equilibrium… between the inner peace brought about by wisdom, and the passions to which the sight of the injustices, sufferings, and misery of mankind cannot help but give rise. Wisdom, however, consists in precisely such an
equilibrium, and inner peace is indispensable for efficacious action. (Ibid., p.274).

If one accepts his arguments concerning the pursuit of the virtuous (and we recognise, of course, that this will be a big conditional ‘if’ for many colleagues) then certain ethical implications follow for those of us pursuing Critical Management Studies. To illustrate the nature of these implications we draw on a recent email circular from the CMS Interest Group (dated 5/6/03) that attempts to identify some of the parameters of the CMS project. Part of the email reads:

Our premise is that structural features of contemporary society, such as the profit imperative, patriarchy, racial inequality, and ecological irresponsibility often turn organizations into instruments of domination and exploitation. Driven by a shared desire to change this situation, we aim in our research, teaching, and practice to develop critical interpretations of management and society and to generate radical alternatives.

It is plain that this mini manifesto is exclusively outer-directed. It locates the evils of the world wholly in reifications ‘out there’ or in the actions of irresponsible ‘others.’ But what if we challenge this ‘premise’ and consider whether we, ourselves, are sufficiently blameless to be casting such moral aspersions on others? Is our critique free from the taint of hypocrisy? Such reflection might lead us to conclude that the first imperative is not to look outward to the amorphous world of capitalist exploitation, social inequity and inauthenticity, but to ask searching questions of ourselves: ‘Am I completely free of prejudice, do I dominate and exploit, are my actions ecologically responsible, am I attached to commodities and acts of consumption?’ and so forth. To engage seriously in a philosophical life that seeks consistently to pose these questions and address them through the cultivation of personal virtues would, we suggest, constitute a genuinely radical alternative to the mainstream. It is a life that would have us striving to be virtuously impeccable; to value friendliness and compassion; to exercise judicious restraint of thought, word and deed; and (in the case of a Buddhist ethic) to aspire to be harmless and free from attachment. This is not to foster political quietism or proscribe speaking out against
suffering and injustice, but it is to challenge the facile assumption that the source of every problem is always already elsewhere.
References


Organization (2003) special issue on ‘Ethics, Politics and Organizing’, 10(2)


Endnotes

1 A version of this paper was presented at the ‘How to do Things with Philosophy’ stream, 3rd Critical Management Studies conference, 7-6 July 2003, Lancaster; UK. We would like to thank Garry Phillipson for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this work.

2 See Parker’s (2003) introduction to the Special issue of Organization on ‘Ethics, Politics and Organizing.’

3 See also Irigaray (2002).

4 The creative imagination of those giants upon whose shoulders others stand so often degenerates into a bureaucratised and uninspiring ‘programme’.

5 The word ‘performativity’ in this context is a specific adaptation of Austin’s concept made by Lyotard (1984) and refers to the systemic manner in which human activity is rendered accountable and manipulable in quantitative terms. Quantification and measurement permit those in positions of power to manipulate resource equations and thereby to exert pressure on those engaged in a productive task to produce the same or more output with fewer inputs.

6 ‘In modern universities, philosophy is obviously no longer a way of life or form of life – unless it be the form of life of a professor of philosophy’ (Hadot, 1995, p.271).

7 Pirsig (1974, 1992) in his two novels draws the same distinction.

8 Speech-act theory ‘itsel’, or this inaugural formulation by Austin, may be said to lack a pre-existent context in which it makes sense to say his words have locutionary value (1), and so, in exemplifying a possible philosophical programme, might be thought of as some kind of mixture of (2) and (3).

9 Derrida (197X, p.321ff) offers an extensive critique of Austin, as do Deleuze and Guattari (1999, p.77ff).

10 See Howells (1999) for an excellent exegesis of this essay and the acrimonious exchange it prompted between Derrida and Austin’s most famous disciple, John Searle. The various developments in the debate (with the exception of Searle’s original response to ‘Signature, Event, Context’) are reproduced in Derrida (1977).
See also the ‘preamble’ to his essay, ‘The Ends of Man,’ delivered as a presentation in the USA during the opening of the Vietnam war peace negotiations and just after the assassination of Martin Luther King (Derrida, 1982).

This is not to deny that ‘thinking’ is a form of doing in its own right. It is, however, to invoke a hierarchical ordering of effects that various forms of actions have in the world. Thinking is, as it were, weaker in terms of social accomplishment than is ‘saying’ which, in turn, is weaker than physical action. We are making a tautological but nonetheless important point: that in order for thinking to be enacted, it has to be expressed and acted upon. Otherwise St. Paul’s cathedral and the A-bomb remain thoughts in the minds of Wren and Oppenheimer, respectively. The hierarchical ordering is also inscribed in social norms that frequently hold individuals more accountable for their physical actions (e.g., taking someone’s life) than for speech or thought acts (threatening someone with murder or simply thinking about murdering someone). We shan’t, however, be insistent on the integrity of this reasoning for to do so would be to fall into the same trap as Austin. The point is made for practical reasons only.