Management and Philosophy:

A Response to “A Conversation with Robert Spillane”

By Andrew Murray


What do pleonasm, tautology, oxymoron and metaphor have to do with management? Alternatively, how can Homer, Plato, Machiavelli, Hume, Popper, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche or Sartre illuminate the problems that managers face? Robert Spillane tells a story, a story that begins in the 8th Century BC with Homer’s epic poem about the Battle of Troy and ends in about 1950 with Sartre’s radical assertion of the responsibility we carry for our actions. Yet, every turn of this story is relevant to what we do today, because it is the story of our civilisation and of the possibilities for thought, language and action that have been generated in that civilisation.

The story is both short and long. It is short because in just two days Robert Spillane proposes to tell us about three millennia of intellectual endeavour. It is short because in the two seminars he attempts to cover what he teaches in a full semester MBA course, “Foundations of Management Thought”. He copes with the shortness of the telling by careful selection of thinkers and thought and by incisive summaries of what each contributes to the story.

The story is long because it covers so much, both in span of time and figure and in the complexity of the twists and turns that the thought of our civilisation has taken. Attendees need to be prepared for a series of shocks as they learn of the assumptions that lie behind the ways in which we think. The story is long because Robert Spillane lectures for two full days. This is made not only manageable but also stimulating by his rare brilliance as a lecturer and by his readiness to respond to questions and comments from participants.

A question voiced several times over coffee was, “Where does Robert Spillane really stand?” This was said first to me by one of his MBA students, who had come for a second look. Expanded, the question meant something like, “Robert Spillane is a philosopher, who has come to explore the truth, so why does he not tell us the best (or only) way to be managers?” As a philosopher, I am glad that Robert Spillane did not answer this question, because if he had he would have become a rationalist, namely, a person who uses philosophical reasoning to make judgements that should be made by means of other forms of reasoning. This is a position against which he argues strongly.

In the seminars, Robert Spillane does four things, and he does them strictly as a philosopher but with wide experience of the activities of managers.

Firstly, he describes two organisational models and the cultures and moralities that underlie them. This is the philosophical task of examining assumptions. What are we implying about human action when we choose either an Heroic Organisational Structure such as was used in the Battle of Troy or by General Electric or the Standard Managerial Structure that was first articulated by Plato?

Secondly, he provides logical tools for the analysis of speech, which he uses to define the kind of statements that are open to claims of truth and falsity. Hume’s fork is a powerful tool and readily learnt. Discover tautologies, which are true but meaningless. Watch the first page of a current textbook on management dissolve into nonsense.

Thirdly, he investigates a model of science that is available to managers as they make judgements both about the art of management itself and about the concrete matters that face them daily. Karl Popper’s description of science as a process of clarifying theories by falsification and amendment suggests that managers should adopt a method of elimination by trial and error.

Fourthly, he analyses the fundamental ideas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which power the turbulent ocean that managers must navigate. This section on the second day is particularly challenging as it unmasks the assumptions with which we live, both those we accept and those that on examination we reject.

Robert Spillane shocked me. He shocked me with his vigorous exposition of Nietzsche’s nihilism, a position that claims that there are no important differences anymore or that nothing is true except in a trivial sense or that there is no basis for standards except power. He shocked me with his rigorous and fiercely logical application of Sartre’s
thought to the proposition that there is no such thing as mental illness.

In turn, I want to shock Robert Spillane by saying that there is no such thing as logic. With even greater determination, I want to say there is no such thing as rhetoric. Both words figured strongly in the Conversation. There is no such thing, I claim, unless by these terms one means the disciplines to which they refer. The sentence, “that’s just rhetoric”, is, therefore, nonsense. What we can find are speeches, whether one sentence long or two days long, whether spoken or written or digitised in word or image. Each of these speeches has a logical dimension and a rhetorical dimension, dimensions that are studied in the disciplines of logic and rhetoric. More careful use of this language in our culture at large would remove confusion especially about the importance of skill in the rhetorical dimensions of speech, something to which Robert Spillane is sympathetic but which he does not develop.

Finally, I will return to another possible meaning of the question, “Where does Robert Spillane really stand?” It could mean, “Robert Spillane is wise, and so why does he not give an account of the world and of human activity that is settled and with which a manager can easily live?” This is what Aristotle did in response to Plato’s thought by combating rationalism and by speaking in a way that recognised different forms of reason and the limits of philosophical reason. Part of Robert Spillane’s story is that, while the Ancient and Medieval worlds had their Aristotelians, the modern world, the world in which today’s managers must function, has yet to generate its own.

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