Ecstasy on the Boundary: The Role of Theorising and Educating in Disruptive Market Places

Steven Segal
ECSTASY ON THE BOUNDARY: THE ROLE OF THEORISING AND EDUCATING IN DISRUPTIVE MARKET PLACE

STEVEN SEGAL
Macquarie Graduate School of Management

To be considered for the essay section

ABSTRACT

The philosopher Martin Heidegger defines living on the boundary as living in between the disruption of the old but stable conventions and the not yet of new possibilities and ways of doing things. The key to functioning in the state of the between relies on our attitude towards disruption: do we see disruption on the boundary as a destructive experience or can we see it as an opportunity to invent new possibilities. Disruptive technologies have developed in fields such as marketing and strategic management that enable uses to turn disruption into new possibilities. But how do we theorise, educate and do research on the boundaries between the collapse of the old and the not yet of the new? How can disruption be built into educational, theorising and research practices? What meta-perspective is required for working on the boundary between the collapse of old conventions and not yet of new ways of doing things? These are the questions that will be addressed in this paper.

I

Disruptive technologies have been developed to cope in proactive ways with the uncertainties of a “postmodern” market place whose boundaries are forever shifting. Such technologies disrupt the habitual and taken for granted ways of doing things and open up new possibilities for creating value in the marketplace. They provide the opportunity to create and innovate new mindsets in response to changes of the rules of the game. More than this, they enable organisations to change the rules of the game. Disruptive technologies have been developed in a number of areas. In the field of marketing the work of Jean Marie Dru (1996) uses disruptive technologies for brands that have lost their way. Through disrupting the organisations common sense way of doing things, Dru opens up the possibility for organisations to see their brands in new ways and to create opportunities that were not even imaginable from the old but stale mindset.
Similarly, in the world of strategic management and organisational structure, Clayton Christenson (2000) articulates a kind of disruptive technologies which enable managers to change their practice and organisations to change their strategic thinking and structure in response to changes that undermine their historical habitual and secure way of doing things. Re-engineering philosophies – for better or for worse – are underpinned by a disruptive technology in their claim to transform organisations from a scientific management perspective to a process driven perspective. They claim that the impetus for such change lies in the fact that we are moving from a modern to a postmodern market condition. And the work of Fernando Flores (1997) also deserves to be mentioned: he uses marginal practices within an organisation to enable it to deal with disruptive change; changes in the rules of the game. All these disruptive processes, it seems, are underpinned by Joseph Schumpeter’s understanding of the free market that for him “progressed” through a dynamic of creative destruction.

Yet while disruptive technologies have been developed to cope with “postmodern” market changes, (that is, to changes in the underlying rules of the game, changes in which the boundary’s or goal posts are for ever shifting), how have our practices of theorising, educating and thinking about the function of theorising and educating changed in response to “postmodern” changes? What kind of theorising and educational practices do we have for refining the art of coping and creating with disruptive technologies in which the boundaries are shifting? How do we improve the art, skills, habits or crafts of those embracing the practices of disruptive technologies? What disruptive meta-theory do we have for reflecting on the intended and unintended affects of disruptive technologies?

For I am not sure that destructive technologies like that of Jean Marie Dru and re-engineering technologies have a full appreciation of the effects of practices of creative destruction on the identity, way of life and well being of people. It is crucial to understand that disruptive technologies do not lead only to new organisational forms, products and services but they create new values, ways of life, mindsets and ways of being. Moreover in doing this they perpetuate and reinforce the anxiety and uncertainty experienced on the boundaries between the collapse of old ways of doing things and the not yet of new ways.

As even Joseph Schumpeter remarked central to the process of creative destruction is the ability to cope creatively with anxiety. Many of the texts in the area of disruptive technologies do not indicate an in depth understanding of anxiety and of its effects on managers and employees involved in experiences of creative disruptions. The anxiety experienced in moments of creative destruction can and does lead to existential withdrawal, isolation, depression and even suicide. It does not automatically and even by the guiding light of a hidden hand lead to new forms of well-being. Indeed, it re-enforces a roller coaster life style of instability. It cannot thus be assumed that disruptive technologies leads invariably to well being. At the very lest this means that we must not celebrate it in uncritical way.

Given that we are living on the boundaries between the modern and the postmodern, we need a philosophy, practice of theorising and education of managers that is response to
the experience of creative destruction on the boundaries. This cannot be a scientific understanding – at least in the positivist sense. For positivist science, is concerned with the production of order. It is underpinned by the assumptions of routine and regularity. We cannot use the language of prediction to think in the space of the between for the logic of prediction is based on the idea that the future will repeat the past. In the space of the between and in times of disruption we cannot ground our thinking in assumptions that expect tomorrow to be like today. We need disruptive ways of thinking about the relation between today and tomorrow; between present, future and past and we need new educational, theorising and research practices to go with this.

In disruptive change the very underlying rules by which we assume reality to function are themselves in question. Where our most cherished assumptions are in question, we have moved into a philosophical attunement – whether we know it or not. This is because philosophy is that kind of activity in which we cannot rely on our habitually taken for granted assumptions, have no foundational assumptions on which to rely but are willing to question the assumptions of the rules of the game. We become philosophical in an existential sense where we cannot take our habitual ways of doing things for granted but has not yet developed any new set of conventions to take their place. We become philosophical where we embrace rather than refuse the anxiety or uncertainty that emerges in the space of “the between.” Our attitude towards the anxiety experienced in the between is, for Kierkegaard, the key to creating, educating, theorising, strategising, leading and producing in the space of the between.

Although in some forms of philosophy the aim of such questioning is to discover the “truth” – or at least to be guided by the idea of truth -- there are forms of philosophy that are concerned not with truth but with disclosing new worlds; new possibilities. One such philosophy is the hermeneutic phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger philosophy is a concern with new worlds disclosed on the boundary between the collapse of the old world and the not yet of he new world. The process of disclosing new worlds occurs through the disruption – or what Heidegger calls the destruction of our habitual ways of doing things. Such destruction when faced in a resolute way is creative: it opens up new possibilities. In this sense Heidegger and Schumpeter share the logic of “creative destruction.”

The same holds true for the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard. It is through destroying what he calls “life stages” that we open up new ways of living. Neither representational truth nor “answers” to questions is the guiding theme of this form of philosophy. Rather, philosophy is a process of disrupting embedded and sedimented conventions that allow for new possibilities and new ways of doing, relating and thinking about the world. Calling this kind of philosophy existential hermeneutic philosophy, Richard Rorty has summarised existential hermeneutic philosophy when he says that it “is the ’poetic’ activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by … the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions. … [Hermeneutic] discourse is supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.” (1980)
It should be clear that just as disruptive technologies, existential hermeneutic philosophy is underpinned by the practice of disruption. Indeed both disruptive technologies and existential hermeneutic philosophy are centred in the power of the strange and unfamiliar to disrupt old and habitual ways of doing things and disclose new possibilities for being and doing. In this paper I would like to suggest that existential hermeneutic philosophy provides a framework within which to look at disruptive technologies, that it provides a framework in which to educate managers in the “virtues” (rather than habits) of disruption, that it provides theorists and researchers with a way of doing research and theorising in the experience of disruption and that it provides a narrative to assess the creative and destructive effects of working, living and dwelling on the boundaries between the modern and the postmodern. For too often disruptive technologies such as re-engineering practices do not have a reflective relationship to the effects of disruption.

My aim in this paper is destructive in the creative sense. Many years ago Jack Welch said that the scientific tradition in management needed to be questioned and destroyed. He believed that scientific management had produced disengaged and indifferent managers. In order survive in times of “turbulent change” he believed in the need for engaged and passionate managers. While many researchers and educators in management agreed with him, they nevertheless continued in their own practices to be social scientists. I want to say that in the context of boundary living the scientific concept of management practices, theorising and educating needs to be destroyed. In the context of the disruption of dwelling on the boundaries managers who are attuned to new possibilities in their environment are needed, a practice of theorising which focuses on the logic or phenomenology of creating new possibilities out of the destruction of familiar one’s is needed, an education which brings out in student-managers the attunement to the development of new possibilities is essential for creative survival in the market place and a philosophy that allows us to reflect on practices of creative destruction is required.

Furthermore, I want to say that as educators, theorists and researchers we need to move from a scientific to an existential hermeneutic philosophical attunement. In this paper I will show that the logic of working on the boundaries between, the collapse of the old and the not yet of the new is what I shall call a “philosophical experience,” that we become philosophical on the boundaries because the boundary is ruled neither by the logic of the old terrain nor by the rules of the game of the new terrain. But it is precisely when we cannot take the rules of a game for granted that we are called upon to become philosophical. Philosophy is practical in times of disruption where the habits, conventions and assumptions that had been the bedrock of our way of doing things can no longer be taken for granted but we do not yet have the security and focus of a new way of doing things. In moments of the breakdown of the old and the not yet of the new we find ourselves in a philosophical attunement or “mindset.” This concept of philosophy is as old as Socrates and is as postmodern as Lyotard. It is to be found in Plato’s idea of leaving the “cave” of conventions – or what in modern terms is called “thinking outside of the box.”

I should hasten to add that to become philosophical does not mean that we now think in an abstract and “theoretical” way about the texts of the great philosophers. Rather it
means that on the boundary we are estranged from the familiarity and common sense of our habitual ways of doing things, that the estrangement from the familiar is the basis not only for seeing the familiar in new ways but is the condition of opening up or disclosing new possibilities and thus that existential philosophy is the activity of disclosing new possibilities through the estrangement from the familiar or habitual ways of doing things.

The successful working through of philosophical experiences is central not only to visionary philosophers but to entrepreneurs, leaders, strategists, managers, educators, artists and scientists who undergo experiences on the boundary’s of their habitual ways of doing things. On the boundaries we move beyond science, rationality or any other habit of practice into a philosophical relation to our practices. It is through embracing the philosophical dimensions of our academic disciplines, our businesses, our organisations and our ways of being that we explore and open up new possibilities for doing things.

II

The turn to philosophy can be found in the marketing philosophy of Jean-Marie Dru. It is implicit in his book disruption: overturning conventions and shaking up the marketplace. The very title of the book is suggestive of a turn towards philosophy. In fact going back to the historical origins of philosophy, we see that the task that Socrates set himself was one of overturning the conventions and shaking up the marketplace.

Dru does not call his process a philosophical one. Rather he sees it as a disruptive technology that is compromised of three elements: convention, disruption and vision (CDV). It is a technology that he uses to reframe brands and products. He claimed that if we wish to change the way consumers think about our products and brands we need to change the conventions in terms of which the community experience the brand and product. We cannot change their way of thinking in terms of existing conventions – all we can do is refine and improve our image in this way. He maintains that for the most part our perceptions and experiences in the world are regulated by conventions that we do not think about us such. For example, we use knives and forks without thinking about them as being conventions. We eat! We do not think about our practices for eating. Indeed if stopped to think about our practices of eating this would get in the way of our eating: “Although conventions are everywhere, they are generally hard to see. These are things that we don’t even notice because they are so familiar. … Depending on the case, we will talk about unquestioned assumptions, good old common sense, or the current rules of the game.” (1996,56)

However, our conventions shape and limit the way in which we see and experience. If we want to change our way of seeing and experiencing, we often need to disrupt our existing assumptions: “All at once, we question the way we have done things in the past. We discover that our way of thinking has been conditioned by biases [and] adherence to outmoded frameworks.” (1996, 57)

By exposing our biases we open up the possibility of seeing things in new ways. The new vision emerges out of the way in which we work with the disruption of existing
conventions: “Disruption is about developing new hypotheses and unexpected ideas … a quest for angles of attack that have never been used before. … It provides a glimpse of what does not yet exist.” Dru maintains that it was through a disruption of their existing conventions that IBM was able to move from being seen “only as a mainframe computer manufacturer; instead, it [became] … the provider of solutions for a small planet.” In his work he shows how a number of companies were able to reinvent their brand through the process of disruption. (1996,59)

This simple model is also a model of the history of original thinking in philosophy. Socrates’ way of thinking, for example, emerged out of the disruption in the conventions of ancient Athenian society. In the face of this disruption Athens moved from being a military empire to being the home of scholarship. Descartes philosophy of rationality emerged out of the disruption of the conventions of the catholic conventions of his heritage. He was caught between a commitment to the Church an an excitement at the emerging possibilities of new science. It was out of this contradiction that his thinking emerged, a thinking that has formed the basis for the western concept of rationality. And when we turn to the broad sphere of existentialism and postmodernism, we see quite clearly how disruption of conventions formed the basis for new visions of human being and their destiny. In Nietzsche, for example, it was the death of God that formed the basis for a new view of the human being. In Kierkegaard it was the disruption of the conventions of Christianity that formed the basis for a re-enchantment of Christianity.

Of course the shaking up that Socrates had in mind was far more fundamental than that of Dru. Whereas Socrates is concerned with the values of society as a whole, Dru is concerned with advertising. But the process involved is similar: in both cases it involves a questioning of conventions that frame our way of perceiving the world. In both cases these conventions are implicit in our ways of perceiving such that we see through them without them being explicit themes of perception. In both cases the “philosophical” task is firstly to make these implicit conventions explicit, secondly to question them andthirdly to open up new possibilities through questioning deeply embedded conventions. In both cases the process of coming to see our implicit conventions involves an estrangement from them. Describing this as a process of defamiliarisation Dru says: “This idea of viewing the familiar in a different manner is critical.” Continuing he maintains that “Advertising must reclaim its role of making the unstrange strange, the familiar unfamiliar.” (1996, 69) Central to the practice of Socratic philosophy are moments of perplexity in which we are estranged from our familiar ways of seeing the world in such a way that the world opens up in new ways.
One of the limitations of Dru’s approach is that he glosses over the significance of the anxiety that is experienced in the disruption of the conventional. To question in the way Dru promotes requires a well-developed sense of being able to deal in creative and productive ways with anxiety. This is because the disruption of our conventions is more often than not an unnerving experience. It is the questioning not of disinterested beliefs but of beliefs through which we make sense of our activities and practices. Our sense of self, of the importance of our work is contained in these conventions. To question these conventions is to question ourselves. As Douglas Mullen has noted: “Our dearest values and judgements are elements of ourselves which we need very badly. To feel them challenged seriously is to experience something very frightful. What is at stake when our style of living is challenged is a large part of our self image, including our self esteem.” (1981)

When our conventions are questioned, we have no firm ground upon which to stand. Experiences of the anxiety and uncertainty generated by the disturbance to our conventions is reported by people across a range of disciplines and professions. Albert Einstein, in the context of science, speaks of the uncertainty that he felt before the discovery of relativity theory. In a similar way Heisenberg speaks of the despair and existential anguish finding himself without scientific conventions to guide him. Commenting on this, Margaret Wheatley quoting Capra says: “In the twentieth century, physicists faced, for the first time, a serious challenge to their ability to understand the universe. … In their struggle to grasp the new reality, scientists became painfully aware that their basic concepts, their language, and their whole way of thinking were inadequate to describe atomic phenomena. Their problem was not only intellectual but involved an intense emotional and existential experience …” (1999,5)

In the context of literature Tolstoy has written extensively of the anxiety of the experience of no foundational conventions: "I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that which I lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by." (1987)

In the context of being a CEO grappling with changing circumstances Mort Meyerson – then CEO of Ross Perot systems – writes of the shock and horror at having discovered that the practices of leadership in which he had been habituated were no longer suitable to the changing circumstances in which he found himself and at the terror of his not having the habits, skills or mindset to cope with his changing circumstances: “When I returned to Perot Systems, my first job as a leader was to create a new understanding of myself. I had to accept the shattering of my own self-confidence. I couldn't lead anymore, at least not in the way I always had. There was a time during that first year at Perot Systems when I would go home and look in the mirror and say to myself, "You don't get it. Maybe you ought to get out of this business. You're like a highly specialized trained beast that evolved during one period and now you can't adjust to the new environment." (1996)
Crucial to Meyerson’s re-emergence with a new understanding and practice of leadership was the way in which he reflected on himself whilst he was in the anxiety: “I told myself I was having the same experience as a caterpillar entering a cocoon. The caterpillar doesn't know that he'll come out as a butterfly. All he knows is that he's alone, it's dark, and it's a little scary. I came out the other end of the experience with a new understanding of leadership. I don't have to know everything. I don't have to have all the customer contacts. I don't have to make all the decisions. In fact, in the new world of business, it can't be me, it shouldn't be me, and my job is to prevent it from being me.” (1996)

These form of anxiety have been called existential anxiety. It is existential rather than neurotic anxiety because it is generated out of the collapse of the conventions in terms of which we live. In contrast to existential anxiety, neurotic anxiety emerges from conflicts or tensions within a person. Existential anxiety occurs where the rules of the game are disrupted and no longer make sense to us. When we lose our conventions, we lose our bearings. The authors of the Clue Train Manifesto speak of the existential moment as a moment of uncertainty between the disruption of old ways of doing things and the not yet of new possibilities: “This is an existential moment. It's characterized by uncertainty, the dissolving of the normal ways of settling uncertainties, the evaporation of the memory of what certainty was once like. In times like this, we all have an impulse to find something stable and cling to it, but then we'd miss the moment entirely.” (2001)

It is not inevitable that the existential anxiety experienced in the destruction of the old and familiar will inevitably lead to the development of new possibilities. Crucial to the re-emergence is an understanding of anxiety and of our attitude towards the anxiety in the between. We need to understand that we cannot “manage” the anxiety of the between: “There isn't a list of things you can do to work the whirlwind. The desire to have such a list betrays the moment. There may not be twelve or five or twenty things you can do, but there are ten thousand. The trick is, you have to figure out what they are. They have to come from you. They have to be your words, your moves, your authentic voice.” (2001)

IV

The experience of anxiety in questioning conventions is a theme that underpins the existential philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard. Like Dru, Kierkegaard articulates a model of convention, disruption and vision but he shows how disruption does not lead necessary to vision. Indeed it can lead to despair, suicide and an attempt to hold onto the familiar world that has been disrupted. Crucial for Kierkegaard is our attitude to the anxiety experienced in disruption. In a beautiful quote he speaks about disruption as a sparkling wine and new vision as a world of new possibilities: “And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating as possibility?”

One of the functions of sparkling wine is to lift us out of the humdrum of the everyday. In the sparkling state of intoxication we dare to dream and imagine possibilities for ourselves. Often we come down to earth with a bad hangover but the ancient Greeks identified wine as generating the mood, passion or eros for philosophy. For the ancient Greeks, as Screech notes: “Drunkenness was a form of ecstasy, so was falling in love; so
were sexual climaxes; so was bravery on the battlefield; so was scholarly devotion to selfless inquiry; so was poetic inspiration…” (1991,10)

For Kierkegaard the “wine” that induces an attunement to possibility is existential anxiety. Existential anxiety is experienced in states in which a person is simultaneously excited and frightened by a possibility. Keirkegaard gives the story of Adam and Eve as an example. He maintains that when God said to Adam that he should not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam experienced two contradictory emotions: on the one hand he experienced the excitement of possibility and on the other hand he experienced the dread of punishment. Prior to God’s prohibition Adam had no sense that he could do anything. When God prohibited him from eating, this indicated to Adam that he could do, that he had possibilities, that he was a “can do” person. As Kierkegaard maintains, the prohibition induced the desire in Adam. However, Adam was also scared because God warned him that he would die if he were to disobey His command. Adam did not yet know what it meant to die and he did not understand exactly what he could do. He only had a vague, free-floating sense of both. This, for Kierkegaard is essential to anxiety. Adam was torn between the possibility and the prohibition; the excitement and the dread without being able to pin down exactly what he was exited about or what he dreaded.

Although not the subject of this paper, it is interesting to note how the same tension underpins Freud’s understanding of the Oedipal complex in which the young boy is torn between the excitement of its love for the mother and the fear of punishment by the father. Indeed we see this dialectic in young children all the time: the very telling of them not to do something, is exciting because it indicates to them that they have the potency and possibility of doing but at the same time, the punishment induces a sense of fear and uncertainty. Anxiety for Kierkegaard is a “sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy.” (1980, 42)

We see this phenomenon in many “love” relationships in which we are simultaneously excited by a partner but also feel afraid of entering a relationship. Or when we are about to embark on a new journey, we feel the excitement of opening up new horizons but the anxiety of not knowing in advance exactly where we are going or where we will end up. We are walking in the unknown. So too in change management programs: we may be excited by the possibilities of change but are frightened about not being able to map out the consequences of the change. The entrepreneur who is seized by an intuition, is obsessed with following the path of the intuition yet does not know that things will turn out the way he or she wants and “knows” that they have a family to feed is caught between the excitement of possibility and the fear and uncertainty of the journey.

Kierkegaard compares the state of anxiety to a state of dizziness. He calls it the dizziness of freedom. This is because there is no thing, no objective landmark to hold onto in the state of anxiety. There is no one or no greater being to make up our minds for us. We are caught in a moment of decision without the possibility of sufficient knowledge on which to make the decision. Once we are gripped by this tension there is no turning back. We are seized by the pull and push of the tension. The rational mind is part of the tension and
we cannot wriggle our way out. Although we would like to be, we cannot be objective. In
anxiety we are in a heightened state of arousal – just as we are with alcohol or in love.
We are distracted from the everyday, cannot concentrate, and are preoccupied. We are
beside ourselves; out of our minds. Even if we force ourselves to concentrate – the point
is that we are forcing ourselves and so are still distracted. Screech sees this state as being
essential to artists, poets and philosophers: “A philosopher, artist or prophet will detach
his ‘soul,’ ‘spirit’ or ‘mind’ from his body ... Such men and women ... are ‘besides
themselves’ or ‘outside themselves’ for joy or fear of wonder.”(1991, 31)

According to Screech this ecstatic state is central to the insights of the genius. This is
because it: “clears the mind of waste matter, makes the imagination more subtle and
profound ... [which brings about] a kind of holy furore called enthusiasm, bringing out
unusual effects in philosophy, poetry and prophecy, so that something divine seems to come
forth.” (1991,35)

Wonder, love, anxiety and melancholia are all states in which we are outside of ourselves.
They are ecstatic states. In these ecstatic states our habitual and familiar patters of doing
things are disturbed and the world is disclosed in a fresh and uncanny light. Making this
point Levinas has said that ecstasy “does not have an irrationalist significance; it is only a
'divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention.' ... Possession by a god,
enthusiasm, is not the irrational, but the end of the solitary ... or inward thought, the
beginning of a true experience of the new ...”(1985,45)

For Kierkegaard anxiety leads to the enthusiasm of ecstasy. Anxiety is a paradoxical
state; a state of feeling as though we are fragmenting or going down that allows for the
possibility of coming up again; an experience of withdrawing or detaching from an old
but habitual way of doing things and a drawing towards a new and as yet unknown, non
describable way of doing things. For Kierkegaard the going down is a withdrawal from
one set of conventions and the going up is a drawing towards a new way world of
possibilities. It is by disturbing us that anxiety wrenches us away from the complacency
of the conventions of the everyday but the disturbance is not an end in itself. It is a
turning towards new possibilities. Although not a Kierkegaardian scholar, the
psychologist Frank Baron describes this paradox well: “The truly creative individual
stands ready to abandon old classifications and to acknowledge that life ... is rich with
possibilities. To him, disorder offers the potentiality of order. ... The creative individual
not only respects the [unknown] in himself, but courts it as the most promising source of
novelty. ... They have more contact than most people do with the life of the ...
imagination. ... The self is strongest when it can regress (admit primitive fantasies, naïve
ideas, tabooed impulses into consciousness and behaviour), and yet return to a high
degree of rationality and self-criticism. ... The strong self realises that it can afford to
allow regression, because it is secure in the knowledge that it can correct itself.”

A paradoxical way of restating the paradox of creative destruction is to say that it is
precisely in those moments of anxiety when the world is experienced as devoid of
meaning that the opportunity for a fresh consideration of meaning becomes possible. For
when we are absorbed and lost in our everyday activities, we do not take the question of
meaning as a passionate question. On the contrary, in our pragmatic pursuits the question of meaning is a meaningless question. It is only when we experience the meaninglessness or emptiness of our lives, that the question of meaning becomes a meaningful and passionate pursuit. (Segal 1995)

This paradox has been articulated by Joseph Schumpeter who notes that entrepreneurs are people who need to embrace the anxiety of the unfamiliar in order to create new products, services and forms of life. Embracing the anxiety of the unfamiliar is, for Schumpeter underpinned by experiences of creative destruction: the destruction of the familiar that opens up the realm of possibility; the possibility of creating new forms of life. For Schumpeter, as for Kierkegaard and Dru the movement from one form of life to another is called an act of “transmuting” values, conventions or paradigms. Such acts are experiences of crossing boundaries or borders between the familiar and the strange. This is not a movement that can be done through logic or analysis because both operate within the realm of a familiar. It requires an act of destruction of the old. This movement is simultaneously frightening and exciting.

But the withdrawal from one set of conventions to a world of new possibilities is not something that happens automatically. The anxiety experienced in the withdrawal of the security of a set of conventions can just as easily lead to destruction and not creative destruction. Because of the panic experienced in anxiety, there is more often than not a desire to withdraw into the familiar of the habitual rather than embracing the anxiety of the unfamiliar. The danger of anxiety is the defensiveness of fundamentalism; an idealisation of the familiar, a holding onto the past rather than an opening up to the realm of possibility. For Kierkegaard a defensive or reactive response to anxiety leads to despair, a despair that is worse that death because it is endless: “In actuality, no one ever sank so deep that he could not sink deeper…” (1980,158) Yet the security and despair of the familiar is a great temptation in the face of the anxiety of the between.

For Kierkegaard everything depends on our attitude towards anxiety. Do we fear anxiety and panic in anxiety or can we maintain a resolute calmness in the eye of the storm? Kierkegaard identifies Socrates as someone who new how to learn from the anxiety of the unknown. He knew how to welcome anxiety and turn it into a practice of questioning that allowed him to see possibilities beyond the horizon. For Kierkegaard Socrates was not just an abstract philosopher. His questioning emerged in anxiety: “Anxiety entered into the soul [of Socrates] and search[ed] out everything finite and petty, … and then [led] him to where he wanted to go.” (1980,159)

Anxiety is the great educator: “Whoever is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility.” (1980, 155) Yet it teaches us nothing in particular. It does not throw us into one particular possibility. Rather it makes us alive to opportunities and possibilities of our situatedness. To use the language of Machiavelli, it makes us responsive to the “spirit of the times.” It is a condition of being attentive, of not taking things for granted but of constantly being able to read and re-read situations in which we find ourselves. Something like Kierkegaardian anxiety is exemplified in Andrew Grove’s philosophy of management. His management style is grounded not in a set of sophisticated techniques.
or set of theories but is grounded in his ability to worry in a way that keeps him alive to new possibilities: “If we fear that someday, any day, some development somewhere in our environment will change the rules of the game, our associates will sense and share that dread. They will be on the lookout. They will constantly be scanning their radar screens. This may bring a lot of spurious warnings … that turn out to be false alarms, but it’s better to pay attention to these … It is fear that makes me scan … searching for problems: news of disgruntled customers, potential slippage’s … Simply put, fear can be the opposite of complacency. Complacency often afflicts precisely those who have been the most successful.” (1998)

It is important repeat that it is neither a perspective, point of view, theory or technique that underpins Grove’s management style but through the way he relates to his anxiety, he is able to maintain an attunement to possibility and the winds of change. Because he can embrace anxiety, he can move between perspectives, theories, techniques and points of view. His attunement to anxiety allows him to be playful rather than being bogged down and dominated by one way of doing things. As Kierkegaard maintains: “whoever has truly learned how to be anxious will dance when the anxieties of finitude strike up the music and when the apprentices of finitude lose their minds and courage.” (1980, 157)

More and more management texts are calling for managers to be able to shift perspectives according to different contexts. While this may sound elementary, as implied in the Kierkegaardian perspective, it requires an education through anxiety. For it is anxiety which allows us to embrace a range of perspectives. It does this by freeing us from being wedded to any one particular way of doing things – or in the language of Kierkegaard, from being wedded to the finite.

Although not calling it existential anxiety, Machiavelli writes about the Prince and thus about a leader as one who is not wedded to one way of doing things but because of his or her sensitive attunement to what he calls the “spirit of the times” is able to shift frame or perspective. For Machiavelli the “virtu” of a leader is not rooted in technique, habit or theory but in the agility of mind needed to respond to the “winds of change. Machiavelli does not, however, take the Kierkegaardian step and show that the agility of mind required for responding differently to different contexts involves learning to be “anxious in the right way.” (1980, 156)

Kierkegaard would be a good source for organisational change theorists and consultants to look at. For organisational change means moving beyond the realm of the actual to that of the possible. But, as much of the literature on organisational change suggests the world of the possible is to frightening for managers and leaders. This is because in the moment of change, the very measures of the new way of doing things are not yet in place. In change we are in the space of the between; leaving the habitual way of doing things but not yet having embodied a new way of doing things. This is frightening for those who wish to proceed on the basis of objectively verifiable information. The literature on organisational change is dominated by resistance, fear, denial, and power struggles in the face of the disruption of conventional ways of doing things.
For Kierkegaard those who are opened up to the realm of possibility through anxiety are not welded or wedded to any particular set of conventions for doing things. They are not bogged down in fear, denial uncertainty when the conventions are disrupted but like Machiavelli’s Prince can respond in proactive ways to the winds of Fortune. They are able to leave the old behind and open up the new. Unlike those who are wedded to the old culture or set of conventions their being and identity are not at stake in any one particular way of doing things. They are able to move beyond.

For Kierkegaard the human being is a synthesis of the actual and the possible: too much of the actual gets us stuck in the here and now; unwilling and frightened to venture forth in the face of the possible. Too much of the possible leads to a sense of disconnectedness from the actual. The crucial issue is to be able to move between them. However, management has not cultivated this dance. As John Kotter notes, managers have generally been trained to cope with the actual; with the current ways in which things function. They have not been trained to cope with the possible and so find it nerve racking to embrace the world of the possible that arises in change. As Grove says: “With all the rhetoric about how management is about change, the fact is that we managers loathe change, especially when it involves us. Getting through a strategic inflection point involves confusion, uncertainty and disorder, both on a personal level if you are in management and on a strategic level for the enterprise as a whole.” (1980)

In Kierkegaardian terms the very thing that managers generally regard as their virtue stumps them in times of change: managers claim their pragmatism as a virtue. In Kierkegaardian terms such pragmatism suggests that they are too wedded to the here and now of the actual. Going beyond the here and now to imagine a future that is not yet; of which we have no certainty creates anxiety for anyone wedded to the pragmatic of the actual. The challenge for managers working on the boundary between the collapse of the old and the not yet of the new is to question the fundamentalism of their pragmatism, that is, that only that which is pragmatic is credible and that anything that falls outside of the pragmatic is rejected in advance of even entertaining it.

Entrepreneurs are able to go beyond the actuality of the concrete and drink of the wine of the possible. They express the anxiety and excitement in the realm of the possible. An example of this is to be found in Fardella’s work “Working Without a Net.” (1990) Fardella’s reflections on his own entrepreneurial ad-ventures exemplifies the anguish and ecstasy of the entrepreneurial experiences. In his reflections he contrasts two life styles; what he calls “living with a safety net” and living without a safety net. He identifies the entrepreneurial life style as one of living without a safety net. The idea of a safety net does not refer primarily to a financial net but to a set of pre defined conventions that give life focus, clarity, a firm sense of role identity and structure. Living with a safety net means living in terms of a set of conventions that define a person: “Working with a net is getting a job and staying there as long as you can, progressing … It is four weeks vacation, personal days, sick days, stock options … Often it involves getting up on Monday mornings in a regretful mood but without the neurotic energy and confusion that bedevils entrepreneurs.” (1990, 10)
In contrast to this, Fardella writes of his experience of living without a net. Here he experienced no conventions to guide him. He did not walk into an office when defined time and space for him. He had to define where to work, when to work and how to work. The boundaries between home and work collapsed completely. But the collapse was not only objective. It was his subjective experience that came up for questioning. His sense of direction or purpose was not given by an organisation but was constantly called into question: “I frequently lost direction and succumbed to confusion over where I was going and what I really wanted to be ‘when I grew up.’” He writes of experiences of disturbance in his sense of reality. He maintained that entrepreneurs who work from home” find themselves feeling like they’re unemployed even if they are working harder than before.” No matter how hard he worked on his own, this was not enough to give him a sense of satisfaction that he was working. While making money was great, ti was not enough to give him a sense of accomplishment. He likened his experience in this realm to that of a manic-depressive and neurotic who cannot get a grip on reality. It was an experience of being riddled with self doubt and dread: “There was this awful feeling when I woke up in the morning that I didn’t have any place to go.” In the early phases he writes of the anticipatory anxiety of an entrepreneur: “In the start-up it is not uncommon to believe that you will starve. You can envision your family being homeless. It’s really scary.” (190,12)

It is tempting to place Fardella’s experience into a psychological frame of reference and say that he went through periods of personal disturbance. However, from a Kierkegaardian and an existential perspective in general it can be said that when the conventions of a safety net no longer serve as a guide, there is no longer any objective measure of our existence any more. We do not have an objective reference point, a reference point outside of ourselves that defines who we are, how we make sense of things, how we go about things. When we give up the conventions, we are existentially alone; locked in our own worlds. Reality begins to fragment because there is nothing in reality that holds reality together. Heidegger articulates this kind of experience when he says that in the perennial gale of creative destruction “There is nothing to hold onto. The only experience that remains and overwhelms us whilst what-is slips away, is this ‘nothing. … Here we too, as existents in the midst of what-is slip away from ourselves along with it.”

The challenge is to produce a world in he state of disruption. In this realm of the possible we have to establish the yardsticks by which things get measured. We need to establish the sense of reality. Reality does not give it to us any more. Furthermore, we have to establish the sense of reality without guidelines as to how to do this. We are in what John Seely Brown calls the “fog of reality.” Existential philosophers refer to this as an experience of no-thingness; an experience in which literally have no-thing or no-convention to give us a sense of reality. Because it disturbs our habitual sense of reality it is a frightening experience; a “dizzying experience” as Kierkegaard calls it and so it is one that we may wish to step back from. Writing about his experience Fardella says: “I have sought traditional employment simply as a result of fear of failure.” (1990, 8)
Working with a net means being guided by external conventions. Working without a net means being able to absorb the anxiety of the possible. For Kierkegaard, those who are able to turn the anxiety experienced in the place of the possible into an educational experience are able to resurface. They are able to experience the excitement of seeing and doing things in new ways: “whoever is educated by possibility remains with anxiety … Then the assaults of anxiety though they be terrifying, will not be such that he flees from them. For him anxiety becomes a serving spirit that against its will leads him where he wishes to go.” (1980, 161)

The entrepreneurial adventure of creating new values and life styles means from a Kierkegaardian perspective being willing to embrace the dizziness and anxiety experienced in the realm of the possible. In the case of Fardella, as we have already seen, his instinct was to run and take cover in the security of a job or career. In Kierkegaardian terms, the existential lesson for entrepreneurs functioning outside of the realm of conventions is to be able to dwell in the eye of the storm. It is to be able to withstand the terror of the self-doubt, the excruciation of the anguish of not having one’s life prescribed conventions, of being alone responsible without having objective knowledge and hence of the direction one is taking. It is through embracing anxiety that we are delivered over to possibility. Again the above quotation from Baron expresses the challenge of Fardella: that in order to see and be in new ways, he needs to embrace his own regression. In a corporate context Andrew Grove has made the same point when in the experience of disruptive change he says that instead of attempting to produce order we need to allow chaos to reign. Chaos is also the birth of new possibilities. As Heidegger quoting Holderlin says “There where the danger is apprehended as the danger, so the saving power grows.” In every danger there is an opportunity. But in order to grow through the danger we need to apprehend the danger as the danger. Instead of being consumed by the danger we need to develop a reflective relationship to it. This is also a principle that underlies psychoanalysis where in it is maintained that it is by staying with our anxiety that we are not consumed by it but can learn from it – indeed can turn into new possibilities.

To live on the boundaries between the disruption of the old and the dawning of new possibilities it is crucial that we are able to embrace rather than take flight or fight in the anxiety of the between. Although Kierkegaard does not develop the theme in detail we need a special “surgeon” to help us on our way, a surgeon who can hold us in our experience of discomfort; one who can provide a secure framework within which to express the insecurity of disruption. In today’s language we may speak of a coach or therapist or even a teacher who is attuned to the anxiety of the between. The point is that there is no need to be on one’s own in this lonely journey.
What concept of theorising is appropriate to the anxiety and excitement experienced in the disruption of the old and the dawning of new possibilities?

As we have seen for both Dru and Kierkegaard estrangement from the familiar is an integral part of disruption. Making the familiar strange as the basis for seeing the familiar in new ways underpins Baren Jager’s concept of theorising. (1983) Jager contests the conventional modernist understanding of what it means to theorise. He contrasts modernist conventions of theorising with the historical origins of the idea of theorising. Whereas in modernist terms theorising is primarily a disengaged cognitive activity based on developing representational and justified statements, Jager shows how for the ancient Greeks theorising was a practice of journeying or travelling from the safety of the familiar homeland to strange and unfamiliar cultures. In the movement beyond the familiar they were estranged from their habitual ways of doing things such that they could see them in a new light: “Theorising made its first appearance as an arduous journey to a place of divine manifestation. … It required … a leaving behind of the familiar and comforting sounds and sights of familiar life.” (1983, 162)

In this sense migration, journeying to a new land, being with people of other cultures or nations involves acts of theorising. For on all such occasions we cannot take our habitual ways of seeing things for granted but in fact bump against them. They become explicit themes for our consideration. This point is exemplified by Hubert Dreyfus: "People in various cultures stand different distances from an intimate, a friend, a stranger. Furthermore, the distances vary when these people are chatting, doing business, or engaging in courtship. Each culture, including our own, embodies an incredible subtle shared pattern of social distancing. Yet no one explicitly taught this pattern to each of us. Our parents could not possibly have consciously instructed us in it since they do not know the pattern any more than we do. We do not even know we have such know-how until we go to another culture and find, for example, that in North Africa strangers seem to be oppressively close while in Scandinavia friends seem to stand too far away. This makes us uneasy, and we cannot help backing away or moving closer." (1993, 294)

In the meeting of strangers we are estranged from our own way of doing things. We cannot rely on them. But precisely because we are estranged from them, they become explicit. We are detached in an existential way from our everyday practices such that they become the focus of our attention. This moment of estrangement or existential detachment is central to theory as a journey of estrangement from the familiar Jager maintains that “Theorising was from the beginning never a mere shadow play of concepts, of disembodied ideas used in a game of empty possibilities. It was rather from the start a commerce with the distant, a desire to reach out beyond the comforts of mundane life towards the distant, festive realm.” (1983, 165)

Estrangement is the mood of theorising. In estrangement we develop a theorising “mindset” or attunement. Here theorising is much more than a critical analysis of theories or statements but is underpinned by the development of a reflective attunement. We are
no longer simply absorbed in our everyday preoccupations but are in the space of a reflective attunement to our everyday preoccupations. For Jager theorising is underpinned by an emotional experience of withdrawal from the familiar ways of doing things. He refers to Socrates to describe this withdrawal. He describes how Socrates’ philosophising in the market place was premised on withdrawing from the familiarity of the market place: “But we should not forget that before his appearance at (Plato’s) symposium he withdrew within the dark porch of a neighbour’s house, where he stood motionless and lost in thought before making his appearance, half way through dinner, at Agathon’s party.” (1983,166)

A more contemporary experience of theorising through estrangement is evidenced in the writings of bell hooks. bell hooks describes her experience of coming to theory in this way. “I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me.” (1994, 59)

The hurt was a specific kind of hurt. It was the experience of being estranged from the very family(iar) environment in which she lived: “I did not feel truly connected to these strange people, to these familial folks who could not only fail to grasp my worldview but who just simply did not want to hear it. As a child, I didn’t know where I had come from. … I was desperately trying to discover the place of my belonging. I was desperately trying to find my way home.”(1994,60) It was in the context of her estrangement that the norms and standards of the way of life into which she had been thrown became explicit themes of questioning. She began to challenge male authority, “rebelling against the very patriarchal norm” of her parental house.

Here we see how estrangement lead her into theorising, that theorising was not an activity of producing justified truth statements but that it was a process of disclosing old and new worlds. We also see that the experience of estrangement transformed her relation to her own world. It took her out of an unquestioning and taken for granted pragmatic stance to one in which she came to see and question her way of life. It was through her experience of disruption that she was lead into the experience of theorising – not thinking about theories but having an experience of theorising. And thus we see that there is a concept of theorising to go with the disruptive technologies experienced on the boundaries between the breakdown of the old and the dawning of new possibilities.

A question that we need to ask is: what are the educational practices that go with this experience of theorising? How do we bring out the “existential skills” that enable attunement in disruption to develop? This is a theme that is being developed in the context of the emergence of philosophical practice, a practice of philosophy that has been gathering momentum since the 1980’s. Some of the skills for working in the space of the between have been elaborated in various publications in this field including my book (2004): Business Feel: From the Science of Management to the Philosophy of Leadership.

I have not in this paper dealt with disruptive research practices. But in principle it can be seen that hermeneutic phenomenological practices of research offer a way of working in
disruption. An example of such a practice can be found in Moustakis’s research into loneliness; a research which began with his own experience of being disrupted by loneliness. The research principle here comes from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger: that to question is to be in question. The phenomenology of policy development in times of disruption has been dealt with by Fernando Flores in a publication called “Entrepreneurship and the Wired Life.” (2000) Published by Demos, Flores also outlines a concept of education for living in times of disruption.

When scientists, artists, entrepreneurs, leaders, theorists, and educators bump up against the limits of their own disciplines, paradigms or habitual ways of doing things, they are thrust into a philosophical experience. Summing up the significance of philosophy for marketing, management, education and leadership in an in between period, Lyotard has said: “A postmodern artist or writer (or citizen) is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and those categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done”.

This is a point made by a number of theorists coming from different disciplinary backgrounds. It is a central point in the entrepreneurial philosophy of Fernando Flores who maintains that it is on what he calls the “margins” of our markets and businesses that we question our habitual ways of doing things in such a way that new products, and services emerge. It is central to Thomas Kuhn’s understanding of the philosophy of science in which he maintains that scientists under conditions of routine have no need for philosophy. It is when, on the boundaries they cannot take their routine habits for granted, Kuhn maintains, that scientists not only turn to philosophy but find themselves in moments of uncertainty and insecurity that challenges them to question their own assumptions. In a similar way the sociologist Ernest Gellner writes of the philosophical moments experienced by societies in transition from old but established ways of doing things to new ways of doing things to societies in which the rules of the game have not yet been formed. He uses Franz Kafka’s idea of metamorphosis to describe this transition, saying that in the world of the between we can appeal neither to our old language for describing things nor do we yet have a new language. He looks at the transition from feudal to industrial society but his thesis applies equally to the movement from modern to “postmodern” societies in which the rules of the game cannot be taken for granted. We have seen how it is to be found in Jean Marie Dru’s technology of branding.

Philosophical experiences underpin Joseph Schumpeter’s theory of entrepreneurship. His central idea of creative destruction is focused on a process of destroying worn out values and ways of life as the basis for opening up new ones. Philosophical experiences are central to the educational philosophy of bell hooks who sees moments of strangeness as opportunities for engaged theorising. Again we have seen how it is to be found in Jager’s existential psychoanalysis when he maintains that the act of theorising is an act of leaving the familiarity of the homeland and through moments of strangeness disclosing new worlds and ways of doing things. It is to be found in the postcolonial literature of Homi
Bhaba who sees moments of being between worlds as opportunities to reflect on both worlds.

The list is long, perhaps tedious. But it is a list that occurs on the margins, on the boundaries of what it means to theorise and educate today. For the dominant paradigm in which education and theorising take place today is a scientific and not a philosophical paradigm. Indeed, looking over the last century we see how disciplines like psychology, sociology, marketing and management have attempted to articulate themselves as sciences. Textbooks in all of these subjects invariably make the claim that they are scientific in their approach to knowledge. But scientific knowledge is appropriate for times of routine.

In the space of the between, we are moving beyond sciences need to develop a true and accurate picture of the world. We are moving away from being accurate observers of the world to, as Nietzsche expressed, an attunement to creating reality; creating our world in which there is nothing yet to observe. We are creating the practices that we are to live by. In the space of disruption, we need to embrace the experience of being philosophical.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Segal S (1995) Essays on Philosophical Counselling by Ran Lahav & Maria da venza Tillmans University Press of America