

Free Space and Room to Reflect

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Jos Kessels and Erik Boers are partners of The New Trivium, a school dedicated to the application of classical philosophical disciplines to the modern practice of management and organisation. Pieter Mostert is a fellow of this school. In this paper—drawn from their forthcoming book¹—they clarify some of the key concepts of their work: free space, different types of rationality, dialogue and debate, mastery and the theory of virtues.²

They introduce their work and approach as follows.

Nowadays the word ‘philosophising’ seems to connote ‘non-commitment’. The notion is that once you let go of your strategic attitude, you are left with a manner of thinking and speaking that obliges you to nothing, thought unhindered by rules and practical objections, a dreamy kind of thinking oblivious to factual reality. This is not, emphatically not, its original meaning. Time was that ‘philosophising’ meant: a thinking and discoursing intent on rationality and insight, on transcending the limitations of the strategic point of view, on expanding and deepening our understanding of reality. And it was certainly not considered non-committal. Quite the contrary, it was expected to enhance awareness, to engender accountability, to evoke responsibility.

To share this kind of reflection and speaking you need certain skills. This is a second prerequisite for communicating. Of old, these skills were bundled in the three linguistic disciplines of the ‘liberal arts’. This Trivium consisted of dialectics, the art or skill of conducting dialogue; rhetoric, the art of persuading; and grammar, the art of arresting and fixing ideas. All three of them are ‘formal’ disciplines, that is to say, they do not deal with the content of an issue, they treat of the communicative form in which the issue is cast. They say nothing about the substance of a proposal or the relevance of an argument. The topics discussed relate to the form given to arguments, the presentation of proposals, the path of fruitful exchange of ideas. These disciplines investigate the conditions for genuine communication.

In terms of their orientation the liberal arts are formal disciplines. In terms of motivation, though, they are not formal at all; underlying them is a very strong substantial ambition. The communication they seek is not only a condition for, but also part of what philosophers call “the good life”, i.e. the common good, the general well-being of a group, the flourishing of ourselves and those who live and work with us. In other words, deeply inscribed in the liberal arts is an ethical orientation. Reflection on the good life is essential to living it, to engagement in it. This implies that we must be willing to investigate our views on ‘flourishing’, that we render account of how we live and how we want to live. Here we meet a third prerequisite for communicating.

¹ *Free Space and Room to Reflect: philosophy in organisations* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2004).

² This paper draws on the first chapter of their book.

We believe it to be vitally important that this form of communicating be achieved in organisations. After all, differences of opinion and insight abound, powers are unequal, interests collide, objectives differ and goals diverge, as do temperaments and characters. In the midst of all this high calibre communicating is crucial. Time and again however our inability to 'bracket' our strategic preoccupation gets in the way. It seems impossible to create free space for the sake of conscious and capable reflection – for philosophising, if you will. In our book we describe how to do that, how philosophy in organisations works.

Schooling

The philosophical approach in our work hinges on the idea of 'schooling'. The term derives from the Greek word *scholè* meaning 'free space'. Originally a school was a retreat where people could reflect together with others on how the world weaves into a whole, what we and others ought to do, how the good life may be defined, attained and lived. School is a place where, for a while, we are relieved of the task of making a living, or taking care of others, or serving specific interests. Schooling is: making use of this free space to inquire into the ideas that guide our doings, to remind us of our initial intentions, to explore the meaning of words and concepts that inform our activities. As inquiry, schooling intends to upgrade our practice. It is a joint effort, since our words and ideas need to be 'honed' by those of others. In the progression of inquiry a team is forged in which participants can develop their own understanding, their personal view of excellence in action. And this in turn opens the way towards a vision shared by all.

First thing we notice in this general description of 'schooling' is the central role of words and language. Humans are linguistic creatures, beings gifted with speech. Schooling, then, turns on inquiry into words, on development of language. To engage in dialogue, to enter into debate, to present an argument, to formulate or write out a point of view, to study a text together – all of these are linguistic efforts. In every case the question is: How do we make use of words?

Within this broad area of language and discourse the schooling aimed at here is specifically focused on rendering account, that is, providing justification for actions. We are not only beings gifted with speech; beyond this we are beings able to respond, i.e. charged with responsibility. The words at our disposal enable us to account for our actions. Schooling teaches us how to do this. So we need the space to seek out the ideas and reasoning underlying our and other people's professional behaviour. We need space to reflect on the words we use to justify our actions for ourselves and towards our colleagues. We need space to inquire into the patterns of thought, the underlying values and the dominant images that colour our perceptions and direct our steps. To get at the bottom of all this, or rather, to let it come to the surface, we need methods that help us in the careful and precise choice of words used in justification of our professional conduct. Of old, such tools were bundled in the three classical linguistic disciplines: dialectic, the art of dialogue; rhetoric, the art of persuasion; and grammar, the art of formulation and good writing.

Reflection on and critical examination of our words and reasoning can best take place in colloquium with others, especially colleagues. After all, we picked up our professional language from our peers. We depend on others, and over time, as we live and work within a professional community, words acquire deeper

significance for us. Take the word “responsibility”. It can easily be defined as: ‘burden of obligation in the execution of a task.’ But it takes years of actually exercising responsibility to fully understand the numerous aspects implied here. It is in the context of shared language and shared practice that one’s personal view on the job is formed. This is why the exploration of meanings is a joint effort; taking the time to discuss, in undisturbed freedom, the ins and outs of the job or issue at hand. Crucial here is the ability to suspend our own ideas and judgements, to be receptive to the thinking of others, to be open to their frames of reference and their understanding of meanings. This is how one’s own thinking gains strength. Paradoxical as it may sound, the ability to speak well is born in the ability to listen. The experiences and insights of others sharpen our own perceptions. This simple fact impresses us with the importance of a ‘public space’, a forum for all in quest of clarity about group or community objectives. The free space of schooling is where this public space is tended and developed, both in simple disciplines as habituating ourselves to let others have their say, and in more complex disciplines like thinking together as a group. Thinking together presupposes a shared interest: to master our craft, to contribute to a project, to strive for a common goal, or whatever. Too often such shared interest is merely assumed. Is the assumption warranted? Joint reflection on basics like this clarifies individual opinions and fosters genuine consensus on what we deem important here and now.

Schooling at Work

Ideally, schooling occurs in the workplace. To be sure, all kinds of interests engross our attention there. External pressures (imposed targets, competition) and internal pressures (personal interests, interpersonal clashes) limit the space and freedom for reflection. Nevertheless, these pressures should not be eliminated via the expedient of divorcing schooling and work. Pressures are endemic to this environment. In fact, frequently pressures are the reason why the need for inquiry into the meaning of concepts or the legitimacy of ideas arises—changes in the sector, personnel shuffles, differences of opinion, and so on. Meanwhile, we have to find a *modus vivendi* with them. This requires a degree of (psychological) distance. More accurately put, it requires the participants to understand that getting at meanings and ideas takes pride of place, and may push other admittedly pressing matters aside, at least for now. We must be willing to devote time and attention to this. And once we have created free space we must take care to leave it intact. We shall persist in holding off ‘work’ (solving problems, formulating policy, recommending strategy) until the pertinent ideas and concepts are—near enough—clear. This is an art: to guard the free space and to prevent it from succumbing to the pressures crowding in on us.

Restraint in giving up free space arises from the awareness that it has intrinsic value. To understand your craft, trade, business or profession you have to stop running about; every so often you have to call a halt, take time out, stop the clock. Sometimes this is a tactic actually applied: there is the documented case that during trade union talks with the Dutch Railways the meeting-hall clock was stopped to create space for further negotiation. This ability to suspend time is peculiar to humans. We are beings that experience time. We are capable of stopping time. By doing that we withdraw—for a moment—from the events that

chain us. We can step out of the flow of events ('work, work, work'). And so we have the opportunity to reflect, to come to terms with a situation and with ourselves. This may sound attractive, but often it is not. It is easier, and perhaps more pleasant, to be carried along on the broad and self-evident stream of company objectives, career, network or whatever. This broader whole acts like a magnet, a constant pull to draw us away from free space. There are always plenty of reasons not to stand still, enough reasons to run with the clock and the tide. And of course we can't stand still forever; we would not survive. But purposeful pauses enhance the quality of life.

Free space is not only a matter of standing still; it is also a matter of making a start. Being human, and hence endowed with awareness of time, we know that things start and cease and events begin and end. Thus, we can look upon our acts as 'beginnings', as freely chosen initiatives rather than impositions or automatisms. We can learn to act as 'initiators', as people who start something, get it moving. That is how we develop a feeling of responsibility, of citizenship, of leadership. Of course we must beware of overextending ourselves. At times we may take on so much and feel responsible for so many matters at once that we spread ourselves too thin, which tempts us to gloss over responsibilities. Here we need to take stock and find the proper balance. Once again this requires a pause, distance, reflection – in short, free space to recall the basics. This too, is a way of rendering account.

Is it possible to carve out the free space needed for this kind of reflection amidst the turmoil of the day? Can we spare that kind of time? Can we stop the daily rush to see if we are still on course, to check whether progression is truly progress? What shape should such reflection take, concretely? What exactly happens during such group sessions, what should you keep in mind, which pitfalls should you avoid? In short, how do you do it, how does it work? The chapters below describe techniques derived from the Trivium disciplines. Here we sketch the substance, importance and background of these techniques, beginning with a rather straightforward case: a management team meeting. Let us review what actually took place there and derive from this some philosophical and practical lessons.

Case: A management team meeting

We were asked to train the management team (MT) of a financial institution in the art of dialogue. "It's not that things are wrong", the Managing Director explained, "but we can probably do better". It must be possible, he felt, for meetings to be more fruitful, more constructive, more of a dialogue. We agreed to spend two days off-site with his MT.

A scheduled MT meeting took place on the first day. This allowed us to see how the five MT members interacted. Every fifteen minutes we called a time-out and had the participants write down what they liked and disliked about the proceedings. After several rounds of this we assessed results. Things were going fairly well—the atmosphere was good, there was general involvement, evident attempts were made to work efficiently. Then again, things could be better—the agenda was too crowded, some issues had not been prepared by the participants. No wonder, really, since the agenda was known to them only just prior to the meeting, that very morning. Besides, the managers tended to speak hastily,

particularly when sticky points were raised. And as the meeting progressed, unmistakable signs of frustration emerged, in tone, gestures, attitude. We wondered what was going on. What was wrong with their style of interaction?

After the lunch break we ran a feedback exercise. This loosened up the atmosphere, making it more informal. We arranged some short debates to illustrate the difference between debate and dialogue and to teach certain debating skills. The managers joined in readily and with obvious enjoyment. But of course this made the question as to what was lacking in their attempts at collaboration more intriguing still. Towards the end of the day the answer was found. As we mulled things over, puzzling and pondering, one of us asked: "What do you actually expect from each other? How do you want to relate?" These questions proved right on the mark, they caused a kind of shock wave. Not that they were answered readily—that is not what such questions are for. But reflection on them gradually led to a clearer picture of what happened in the meetings. If we zoom in on it we get something like this.

The chair tables an item. The others perceive this item as a problem in need of solving, a decision to be taken. They think about it feverishly. Someone proposes a solution. The next speaker proposes something else, without paying much attention to the first suggestion. A third speaker recommends something different still. In short order various unconnected solutions, arguments and proposals are on offer. They begin to feel pressed for time. The item is taking too long; other points on the agenda claim attention. So the chair announces a decision, either in terms of content or procedure. The others are left with the unsatisfactory feeling that their contribution did not count for much. For the next item the process repeats itself. Frustration builds up as the meeting continues. Supposedly this is the place where all the organisational lines converge. But what if the team is about as cohesive as a handful of pebbles? Mounting frustration makes for a growing tendency to assume entrenched positions. The MT meeting becomes a formal decision-making machine, stuttering and stumbling. The fact that it does not grind to a halt altogether seems due to the lubricant of cordiality. A second look however shows that precisely this apparent mutual courtesy causes the stalemate: it prevents the MT members from truly getting involved with each other and really picking each other's brains.

This insight marked the turning point in the session. During the second day we did dialogue exercises. Dialogue (and effective debate, for that matter) assumes the intention to engage with each other, to interact rather than to hide, to take note of what is said and to probe why it was said, to listen to words and 'hear' the (hidden) meanings. For this, you need to make room. You need space to come together, space to explore an issue rather than rushing a solution, space to discover a person rather than seeking hasty agreement or disagreement, space to reflect on yourself, your own thinking and feeling, rather than immediately venting a final judgement. This is first and foremost a practical matter of managing your time, allotting time to talk about a topic and to feel out each other's views on it. The necessary person-to-person relation takes shape in the course of this. Here we have the essence of what the Greeks called *scholè*: free space, a time without obligations. To enter into dialogue you need to create such free space.

Obstacles to Dialogue

Below we will analyse the concept of free space much more extensively. Still, even now we can begin to see some of the biggest obstacles to genuine dialogue. As a rule our daily work leaves us with little time and usually we tend to be strongly goal-oriented and focused on results. Dialogue asks of us that we adopt the opposite pattern, namely a degree of independence from goals and results as well as sufficient time and free space. Can we do this in the daily practice of our work? Is it possible to attain, caught up as we are in the daily frenzy and the unceasing clamour for our attention, the peace and quiet we need for reflection and personal awareness? Is it reasonable and feasible that a management team defers its agenda and reserves time for inquiry and dialogue whenever they face an issue in need of some basic analysis? What would happen to organisational management if executives engaged in unrestricted philosophising?

Free Citizens

Let us take a different approach to these questions. Suppose we do not take the trouble of seeking to create free space. We do not take the time to achieve genuine mutual engagement. We leave reflection and the exploring of ideas to people who have nothing better to do. What are the consequences of that?

At any rate we will lose a number of things that most of us are loath to do without. First of all, we won't have personal contact, the feeling that each of us matters to the others. Now surely, you could say that as member of a management team you are not hired for this. But next, you forgo pleasure, the basic and simple joy that stems from mutual involvement and community feeling, from going for something together. Of course, here too you can say that this is not part of the job contract. Nevertheless, mutual understanding and shared enjoyment of work are basic to curiosity and confidence, to the exchange of experience, to the development of new ideas, to inspiration and innovation. They are essential for joint learning processes, for what nowadays we call knowledge sharing and knowledge production. These are aims that managers do pursue, for themselves, for their people down the line and for the entire organisation. This is why they bring in external expertise, have tailor-made training programmes designed and implemented, and even overhaul complete organisations. But these things won't work without free space. Nor will a number of other, still more essential and basic matters ignored by most of the management handbooks. We'll turn to these now. To do so, we go back to the days when dialogue was first 'discovered', back to ancient Greece during the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

In those days the Greeks were developing a society based less on raw power and rigid tradition than on recognised authority and rational persuasion. The ability to speak on public affairs, politics, social institutions, balance of interests and the like took on importance to the point that scores of schools of rhetoric were established. Such schools taught you to select and master the best ways to convince or persuade people in debates, dialogues and speeches. Many free citizens in the polis attended these. They made use of them, not only to become proficient in exerting influence in politics or in court, but not least because it was the duty of every free citizen to be involved in public affairs. Those who only looked after their own affairs (*to idion*) were looked down upon as lacking in well-rounded development, as *idiots*—a word still with us today. Such persons did not

function as free citizens and would in fact lose the rights and privileges given with that title. None but citizens could be free persons. Only those who involved themselves with others, with the group, with the community as a whole, could realise their potential as reasonable beings and develop their noblest, most human qualities. For this one needed *scholè*, free space, not as a place where the privileged could pass the time, but where free citizens would ‘form’ their freedom as an exercise of obligation.

Scholè then—or our word “school”—carries a double meaning. It refers to a place where you are free of obligations, liberated from the care for your own interests or those of others. It is also the place for self-development to freedom, to citizenship, to become the reasonable being that essentially you are. In short, freedom is both base and target of schooling. School is a place where you are free to reflect because you are temporarily relieved of your task as breadwinner, as caretaker of your neighbour’s and other affairs. At the same time it is the place where reflection turns to what should be done, what you and those around you truly seek, what are the good life and the common good, and what fair and just demands these lay upon us all.

One could object here that it wasn’t all that difficult for those ancient Greeks to have this kind of free space and time. After all, they had their slaves to do the work and their women to keep house. No wonder they were free to reflect and debate all sorts of issues at leisure. But this objection won’t hold. Think of all the conveniences surrounding us, the machinery and technological gadgetry, the means of transportation, the shops and public utilities at our command. Look around the house and count your slaves. Someone actually did, and found that on average there are at least 56 of them in any household. So compared to the ancient Athenians we should have plenty of free space and time.

To the classical mind free space was absolutely essential. We notice this if we attend to the word *otium*, the Latin word for *scholè*. *Otium* is the root of *negotium*, which refers to activities associated with business (think of “negotiation”). Note that the word is a negative construct: *nec-otium*, the negation of free space, telling us that free space was the standard, the norm. Time spent on looking after your own affairs meant a deviation from the norm. *Negotium* was lack of free space, lack of opportunity to actualise your human potential as free citizen.

Summing up then, from this point of view free space is not only conducive to personal satisfaction, nor just for initiating learning processes and knowledge production in an organisation. It is much more basic, more important and more profound. Free space is the *sine qua non* for free citizenship, for becoming a peer among one’s fellows. It is needed in learning to consider the common good, in learning to carry shared responsibility. It is indispensable for self-development and the fulfilment of one’s destiny as rational human being. Free space lies at the root of all mastery and excellence and of the virtue so central in the Socratic quest for meaning.

Original Thinking

Throughout his life, Socrates, ‘midwife’ to Western philosophy, drew people into talks and inquiries, creating free space and appealing to their ability to be free. In the market place, the sports school (gymnasium), the homes of friends, everywhere

his insistent questioning would urge others to inquire into what eudaimonia, the good life, entailed.

As mentioned above, there were many teachers in those days who offered their mostly rhetorical wares to all and sundry. Like modern-day management gurus, these sophists prided themselves on the great practical value and usefulness of their knowledge. But when Socrates engaged in dialogue with them, he would invariably demonstrate that the sophists had no real clarity on what the good life implied, or what ultimate goal was served by the knowledge they offered for sale. Hence they were unable to say whether their lessons would be put to good use or bad. Sharp irony and cutting logic laid bare the sophists' failure; they argued in all directions, depending on the occasion and the interest to be served. To achieve the desired result, namely to effect persuasion persuade others to some point of view, was to them far more important than inquiry into what result was truly desirable, and why. In other words, just like their present-day counterparts, the gurus of those days were not interested in free space at all. They were first and foremost serving special interests. But that means that freedom of thought and speech is restricted from the start. Free space demands a certain disinterest, an open-mindedness and mental freedom that result from not being bound by specific obligations. This is as true today as it was then.

Does this imply that interests and obligations play no role in a 'free' discourse? No, certainly not. Free talks definitely involve interests and obligations. But there is a difference—subtle, but crucial. The difference is that we are not chained by them, that we can keep free of them. Recall the management team meeting described earlier. The problem there was that at first the team members could not let go of their interests. They were unable to create a free space. They persisted in speaking in terms of goals, of the need to achieve results, to determine necessary operations, in short, from an attitude of hands-on management. Tied to these interests, they kept seeking to convince the others of their own point of view, their own image of the common good. It was not until they discovered that, notwithstanding their expertise and in spite of their goal-directedness and social skills, they were running aground and their meeting machine all but stuttered to a stop --- only then was space given to an essentially different way of speaking, not aimed at goals but at values, not focused on action or results, but on principles.

Both ways of speaking relate to interests, but they are of a very different nature. Philosophers call the first form 'instrumental rationality'. In simple terms, this is the kind of reasoning aimed at looking for the most efficient means to achieve a given objective. It is the problem-solving rationality. It seeks to interpret a situation or to fix behaviour so that you have a grip on things and hence are able to mould them to specified goals or interests. Let there be no misunderstanding here. Of course this form of thinking and speaking is important; no organisation can do without it. But it is a form that befits operational thinking, a thinking inside the lines of the playing field, confined to a pre-established framework, where freedom is limited.

The second kind of speaking, relating to values and principles, emerges from a quite different way of thinking. Here it is we who mark our boundaries, fix our goals, define our playing field. This is the kind of thinking appropriate to free space. Free space is where our thinking is 'original' in the literal sense of the word, i.e. from the origin, from the values and principles that move us. The difference between these two forms of thought and speech comes to expression in the

language of classical Rome and Athens alike. According to Hannah Arendt, the ancients had two words for taking action: operational action (for which the Greek word is *prattein* and the Latin is *gerere*); and initiating action (*archein*, *agere*). This second form of acting was the prerogative of the leaders. Only they could initiate an action (*archein*) who were themselves leaders (*archon*, *princeps*). They were the ones who had free space. They could free themselves from daily cares to turn to the whole, the polis. They were expected to formulate starting points (*archai*, *principia*), to think in terms of values and principles, determine boundaries and limits, develop a vision. For the ancients, then, free space was intrinsic to leadership, to the ability to initiate, to begin something new, to introduce ideas and put them to work.³

Authority

In philosophical parlance this second kind of thinking, speaking and acting is referred to as “substantial rationality”. In a nutshell, such thinking and speaking projects our little stories, our daily cares and the welter of practical, instrumental preoccupations, onto the background of our original starting points, our principles, the broader story behind our immediate concerns, that which prompted our actions. By clarifying these origins, the values and principles at stake, recalling why we once took this or that initiative, we can gauge assess the little stories, weigh and measure them, confirm their value. Which allows us to decide: whether to give them a new start or find them inadequate.

The content and effect of the two types of rationality differ in major ways. Consider ideas on the substantial level—such as an answer to the question about mutual expectations asked at the MT meeting, i.e. the meaning and value of cooperation. Such ideas are more basic, less linear (less means-goal orientated), more intent on larger, shared interests than on private ambitions. They are freer, more authentic and personal. And their effects are quite unlike those of instrumental thinking. Instrumental concepts—‘client-centred’, ‘efficiency’, ‘cost control’, etc.—make for convergence and conformity, rules and sanctions, they restrict freedom. Substantial thinking is inspiring, creative, innovative, it enhances freedom. Instrumental rationality follows the law of entropy: its concepts cool and lose their vitality once the goal is reached. Substantial rationality invariably moves the other way: the more reality values and principles take on, the more strength they mobilise.⁴

The core of the difference is that principles and values have authority. They are what we believe in, what we freely commit ourselves to. They motivate us in the literal sense: they move us, they make us initiate things. Socrates’ interrogations were always probing for these wellsprings of our thinking and doing. ‘Authority’—Latin *auctoritas*, from *auctor* (giver of increase) and *augeo* (enlarge,

³ See Hannah Arendt, ‘What is freedom?’ (2000). This contrast may not be entirely correct linguistically. *Archēin* means ‘beginning something’, and moves to ‘ruling’ and ‘displaying initiative’. There is a link between *archēin* and acting from *archai*, principles, leading to the connotation of originality and mastery. The usual Greek term for acting is *agein* in the sense of ‘to lead’, ‘to be in command’. The same holds for Latin *gerere*, ‘perform something’ and *agere*, to lead, to be in command. We followed Hannah Arendt because the contrast points up our distinction between instrumental rationality and substantial rationality. Perhaps, though, it is more an interpretation than a factual definition of the classical meaning. (Thanks to Marjon van Es for this suggestion.)

⁴ Compare G. Broekstra (2000), ‘De verschillen van waarde’ (Differences of value)..

make grow)—is literally something that augments us, that makes us grow. Principles and values have authority because they make us grow, make us rise above ourselves. They are our ‘starting points’, the reason why we start things, the cause of our initiatives. They are ‘larger than life’. It is in these ‘prime movers’ that our original choice resides, and hence our freedom.

Freedom and Authority

How are we to conceive of the substance and content of ‘authority’? When is authority appropriately attributed? And how exactly do freedom and authority merge? As the name implies, the ‘liberal arts’ of the Trivium school us in freedom by learning to understand true authority and act accordingly. This section offers a brief outline of the classical view of the two concepts as brought together in the ideal of excellence, or mastery. The next section sketches the implications of this for communicating as in the case of the management team meeting described above.

Mastery was the core of the classical ideal of education and the condition for happiness or ‘the good life’ (*eudaimonia*). In the classical philosophy schools all training of the mind aimed at this. Notably, this was not merely a personal thing but an emphatically social ideal. Personal development was equivalent to development towards leadership. This is why Socrates could picture mastery over the soul and proper civil governance as two sides of the same coin.

Socrates assumed that all men desire happiness, flourishing, self-fulfilment, being in good shape. Its necessary condition is *arete* (*virtus* in Latin)—mastery, excellence, worth, capacity. As Socrates saw it, *arete* was a specific type of knowledge, insight into proper conduct and right action, ability to perceive the path to well-being and happiness. This faculty of discrimination has to do with clarity on the essentials in a given situation. It is not a purely mental power, nor a skill in the ordinary sense of the word. It is a form of knowledge that infuses our attitude and the way we relate to others: free or cramped, relaxed or stiff, magnanimous or narrow-minded. In other words, the master’s knowledge is not of the same order as that of the scientist or the expert. It is more akin to virtuosity, to acting with virtue, than to expertise or theoretical reasoning. Virtuosity resides in the style of performing, in the freedom, the ease and the elegance of our actions.

This ‘masterly’ attitude is spelled out in the four so-called ‘cardinal virtues’ (*cardo* = hinge). They provide us with images of what, in the complexities of our intellectual and emotional economy, freedom and excellence and elegance mean. They are based on the three ‘motivational centres’ that the Greeks customarily identified with the head, the heart and the belly. As to the belly, this is the pleasure-seeking in us, the desire to satisfy our physical needs, the love of food, drink, sex and song, good company and admiration. Virtue here is moderation, self-control (*temperantia*). It is the ability to neither get drowned in a vortex of needs and inclinations, nor deny or suppress them too much. It is the art, not of enjoying less, but of enjoying better. For control and cultivation of our needs lead to their intensification. “The profounder our happiness”, said Spinoza, “the greater the perfection awaiting us”.

The heart is the seat of ardour, excitement, indignation, the fervent ambition to perform, to achieve, to count among people. Courage or fortitude is the mark of excellence here (*fortitudo*). It is the ability to contain our fears, conquer ourselves,

transcend our libido. It is the freedom that arises when ardour does not escalate into foolhardiness nor shrivel into cowardice. At the threat of danger the timid slink away, the over-confident mount a reckless charge. Fortitude is the dignity of resolve, the steadiness in the face of disaster, the refusal to succumb to anxiety. It is the virtue that makes you start—or restart—something, it is the resolve to carry on in spite of fatigue.

With our head and mind we seek truth. We desire to know what is real and what illusion. The head focuses on intellectual rigor and veracity, searches out the right point of view and determines what is reasonable. Mastery here takes the form of prudence (*prudentia*). This is the ability to weigh in an appropriate manner the good and the bad in a situation. Prudence is practical, not theoretical. It is the virtue of acting wisely, the art of dealing with uncertainties and assessing risk. It is the gift of circumspection when faced with the unknown. Prudence is also the ability to note essentials, enabling us to know what to choose and what to avoid. According to Aristotle all virtues proceed from prudence. A virtue without the wisdom of prudence is like a rudderless ship.

Apart from these three there is a fourth cardinal virtue—the ancients considered it pre-eminent—namely equity or justice. It is the ability to effect the proper equilibrium, both in oneself, between the belly, the heart and the head and, beyond that, in the reality outside, between different kinds of interest groups and their claims. Hence justice is, par excellence, the virtue of leadership. It is the art of the whole, the art of ensuring that each has its place, task and share, the art of giving the multifarious cohesion of a community its optimal form. Justice weighs need and merit, goal and means, rule and fairness, freedom and equality. It is the ultimate target of all other excellences, as social unity is founded on it. Justice is the virtue of order, of citizenship, of communal freedom. It presupposes a developed capacity to place oneself in someone else's position, to be mindful of the perspectives and interests of others. And it demands that we do not place ourselves above others or above the law. Justice is the art of proportioning, apportioning and holding together. Without justice a society will collapse. Just like a dialogue.

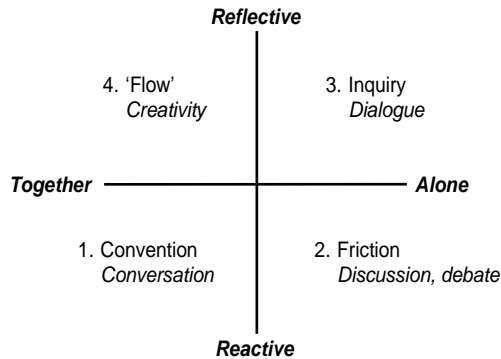
These four cardinal virtues make up the continuous background (and sometimes emerge centre stage) in Socrates' inquiries into words and meanings. They may be seen as the fertile seedbed of freedom, as an ideal of responsibility, as a standard of accountability. They are the hallmark of mastery and excellence, they fuse authority and freedom into one.

Practising the Virtues: The Conversational Grid

What is the impact of these cardinal virtues if applied to a meeting such as held by the management team? What role do they play in the creation of free space? What happens in communication in which participants lose their freedom or are unable to create free space? Some factors have already emerged. The participants in the management team meeting pursued a purely instrumental train of thought. They acted like subordinates. They did not really want to engage each other.

At this point we will relate such factors to a current model of dialogue developed by systems therapist C.O. Scharmer, and simultaneously link them to the doctrine of virtues outlined above. Scharmer engaged in conversations with problem children in the presence of their families. Video recordings of these talks

enabled him to develop a model of the different phases or 'fields' in discourse. Philosopher and dialectician William Isaacs (1999) adopted the scheme for analysing discourse in organisations.



The model consists of two axes. The horizontal axis points out whether in our talking and interaction we stress *togetherness* (the importance of the whole and the group) or stand *alone* (and pursue individual interests). The vertical axis illustrates whether in our communication we demonstrate *reactive* behaviour, induced by others (i.e. a dependent attitude), or *reflective* behaviour, self induced (i.e. an autonomous attitude). The two axes define four fields. Characteristic for the first (lower left), is that participants show togetherness and reactive behaviour. They conform to prevailing **conventions**, they are polite, friendly towards each other, well mannered. This kind of talk we call conversation. In conversation we want a pleasant atmosphere, or at least not unpleasant, and not abrasive. We are friendly and obliging, observe decorum, respect the rules of social conduct and don't upset the pecking order.

At some point this sort of communicating no longer satisfies. Conventions become restrictions, the rules a straitjacket, friendliness a fake. If against our better judgement we keep up the façade we are likely to lose our freedom. Freedom demands taking a stand. We may have to take some distance from the group, brush conventions aside, and challenge the pack. In short, we shift to the second field (schematically represented on the lower right). This is the realm of friction. Here positions are opposed, arguments countered, propositions criticised. Conversation turns into discussion or, if managed properly, debate. Participants are now on their own.

For the most part, **friction** is reactive. Even if couched in the friendliest of terms an attack prompts defence. Note that one needs courage or fortitude to make this transition. Any transition from one field to another implies a crisis to be overcome. In this case it is the crisis of daring to stand-alone. It is the critical decision to defy existing arrangements and relationships and to challenge fellow participants. Chances are that you disrupt the group and risk your skin. This takes courage.

A discussion or debate can be an outstanding way to collect and test a variety of relevant arguments. Equally, however, we can lose our freedom in it. When talking turns to friction and opposition, attack and defence, we tend to entrench ourselves. We marshal an armada of arguments to refute objections, to undermine the views of others, to convince others of our truth. A colleague has the floor, but no audience, because everyone is busy mentally rehearsing their next rebuttal. In

short, we harness ourselves with mental blinkers, eyes fixed on the convictions that must win the day or at least be serious contenders: our own. Too often, disagreement with an idea is seen as dismissal of a person. This is what happened in the case of the management team, albeit in a veiled manner.

In organisational discussions this is a common occurrence. Meanwhile we have seen what is needed to overcome such crises and to retain our freedom: create space and take time to establish real rapport. Stay your hectic pace, shed your shell of goal-directedness and dynamism, draw on a deeper level of rationality. To be sure, this implies a leap to another level of thinking and discourse—a leap in the dark for the action-orientated among us. For, next to creating free space we are called to suspend judgement. And this is a serious hurdle to take. We must learn to observe both our ideas and those of others. Observe them without identifying with them or rejecting them. We need a kind of distance such that we become bystanders, witnesses to our own and other people's thinking.

This is not to say that suspension of judgement is to cease judging. You can't. All you do is put some distance between your judgement and your immediate reactions, you rise above merely reactive behaviour. By creating space you prevent mental myopia and tunnel vision. It allows you to listen, to inquire and to acknowledge new possibilities. Note that here too, you must let something go. To escape being hemmed in and to move on into the third field you must relinquish attachment to your own views, your wish to be agreed with and to convince, your inclination to return a punch. You must also set aside your infatuation with speed, action and efficiency, for this is not the way of genuine reflection. Reflection grows in the space and the emptiness of doubts admitted and confusion acknowledged. Is this too high a price to pay? Well, a fractious discussion cannot be turned into fruitful dialogue or seminal debate as long as the participants do not practise temperance and moderation, that is, as long as inclinations and predilections are not reined in by (self-)control. Without moderation a discussion cannot possibly attain the level where personal and shared freedom flourish together.

In the third field the attitude of **inquiry** is dominant, which makes discussion turn into dialogue, explorative talking. Here we have space and time to reflect, not only instrumentally but also substantially, on our original intentions. We have room to reflect on relevant values and significant principles, on what we deem authoritative. We have the freedom to initiate something, to re-initiate it, or stop it. We investigate our interests with a degree of dis-interest and reinterpret them as we compare and test different judgements, views and arguments in terms of validity and legitimacy. In a dialogue we start giving our freedom a shared form.⁵ In this third field we can fail to realise our freedom—all the more easily because the process can be subtle, almost unnoticeable. What happens is this: once we have created space to engage in shared reflection, we proceed to exchange our views and thoughts about things. But these are quite literally 'things thought'. They are the thoughts of yesterday, stored and shelved in our memory as fixed (and probably formerly successful) patterns. We tend to look upon the explication of our 'thought' as reflection. It might be more to the point to speak of (almost

⁵ The book describes in much greater detail the skills required for dialogue and the difficulties to be overcome.

mechanical) retrieval, re-production. Real thinking, free thinking, is new thinking. That is quite a different thing.

New thinking requires that we let go of our old thoughts, fixed truths and evident convictions, so that we can look upon a question with unclouded eyes. We all are afflicted with a large number of unshakeable convictions, with built-in blind spots and fixations. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) termed them 'idols' or illusions: images coloured or distorted by our personal perceptions, needs, desires, character and so on.⁶

Dialogue is the outstanding means by which we can liberate ourselves from idols and fossilised thoughts—on condition that we step out of our usual patterns of thought and ingrained mental routines. We need fortitude for that, and moderation as well. But we also need something of an entirely different order. We need imagination, the power to think new, as a 'beginner' in the sense described above. Imagination is the basis of discrimination, that is, the ability to distinguish importance and unimportance, relevance and irrelevance. And it is the basis of prudence, the ability to be realistic, to stand apart from our numerous illusions. Without imagination we, paradoxically, cannot see things as they really are.

All of us can recall when a group actually succeeded in 'thinking the new' and we were able to come up with truly new ideas. This is an inspiring, thrilling and even euphoric experience, evoking a strong 'we' feeling. Nowadays we use the term "**flow**" with reference to an experience like that. The classical term for it is *metanoia*, literally 'turn of thought', or shift of perspective. This is what goes on in the fourth field of our scheme. Isaacs compares this phase of conversation with a jazz band jam session. A jazz band improvises. And just as in a conversation, the musicians can rely on patterns they have since long used and perfected, or they can think of something new right then and there on stage, something they never played before which suddenly adds a new dimension to the old themes. The audience knows the difference. Without this spark the players may display great skill or even perfect technique, but the sound is dull, it doesn't swing, there is no soul in it. Alerted to the flow the group begins to 'shine'. You see the concentration and intense involvement with each other and the music. What you hear is an electrifying eruption of creativity and sheer joy. It is an amazing mix of discipline and surrender, of autonomy and togetherness, of freedom and commitment. This is the kind of freedom we are talking about, the freedom that arises in a well-conducted dialogue.

Schooling and the Liberal Arts

How can we make such freedom our own, personally and corporately, in our work and life? This calls for schooling. Without schooling most of us lack the ability to attain genuine individual freedom, let alone a freedom shared.

We believe that it makes sense to build this schooling on the liberal arts and their foundation in classical philosophy. History often demonstrates that renewal is predicated on a return to the beginning. The Trivium disciplines emerged when the Greeks first devoted free space to thinking and discoursing on the perfection of life, on how we can teach ourselves and others to grow in harmony with our

⁶ For a discussion of Bacon's views and the role of idols in organisations, see Jos Kessels, 1997, pp. 36-39.

'beginnings'—excellence, mastery and the good life. Ever since then, for more than 2000 years, these disciplines have shaped the form and content of schooling and education throughout the Western world, be it in very different ways.

In the days of Socrates schooling was a matter of individual, professional teachers. As a rule they were found in the gymnasium. Originally the gymnasium was an army training field where, for a period of two years, boys received physical education (*gymnos* = naked) in preparation of their entrance into citizenship. After these two years they were expected to continue refresher training: mobilisation was always a possibility. Hence men of varying ages attended training sessions. There was no entry fee, but the teachers were paid, so that especially the well-to-do were frequent visitors. In the gymnasium precincts these men gathered around the teachers, forming dialogue groups that eventually evolved into regular schools.

Plato was the first to offer a formal programme of three to four years at a fixed place, the Academy. This was the first renewal and the school was to stay in existence for nearly a thousand years. Aristotle established a school of his own, the Lyceum. His daily programme consisted of morning classes for the initiated and afternoon sessions for the public. These were not institutes of learning as we know them today. Groups conversed about a broad variety of topics and from time to time received instruction in them. The University of Athens grew from this, when young men from throughout the Greco-Roman world came to Athens for schooling.

When, in Rome, education began to be institutionalised, distinctions (though not very strict ones) were introduced between lower, intermediate, and higher education. Lower education consisted mostly of learning to read and write (compare our British 'grammar school'). Intermediate education focused on rhetoric, the theory and practice of debate and public discourse. Higher education added dialectics, logic and epistemology or theory of knowledge, and other disciplines such as law, medicine and, later, theology. In the course of the Middle Ages the linguistic Trivium was united with four mathematical disciplines, the Quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music, to form the seven 'liberal arts'. Together these made up the propaedeutic for any further study, prerequisite in the development of free-minded people. Throughout Western civilisation, the Trivium especially has continued to exercise great influence on the form and content of education.

Up until modern times the scope of the liberal arts was far broader than the name suggests today. Grammar included the reading of literature and the study of literary theory. Rhetoric embraced law, composition and stylistics. Geometry also dealt with what we call geography, natural history and medical botany, research into the medicinal properties of plants. Music treated not only of the rules for choral song but also of musical theory and the relation between harmony and number theory. Evidently, the scheme of the seven disciplines was a fertile and flexible concept. In times of ignorance and intellectual stagnation it would withdraw into a lean and dry formalism. In times of revival and intellectual growth it underpinned the vigour of cultural achievement. The Church could give it a dogmatic, scholastic dress. Conversely, in Renaissance humanism the liberal arts reinterpreted and reinstated the classical idea of freedom: autonomy, self-control, generosity and the full realisation of human potential. In the 19th Century

the liberal arts still inspired German educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Currently there is renewed interest in the Trivium disciplines. They prove attractive not only to philosophers, logicians or communication theorists, but also to practising consultants, educators and leaders in organisations. This need not surprise us. These skills of language are much in demand, on both the instrumental and the substantial level. On the one hand people in key positions of responsibility are expected to argue well, to be convincing, and to contribute to discussions. Leadership entails that you can distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable, desirable and unwanted, pertinent and irrelevant. On the other hand, formulating a corporate policy requires the ability to develop shared meanings, to find values and principles that can guide a group and set contours for a policy framework. It implies that you are able to justify starting points and test them together. Where these abilities are lacking or inadequate we are not able to associate appropriately, and achieving a shared freedom is next to impossible. The Trivium provides schooling in these abilities, schooling in reasonableness and freedom. It is this schooling that we have adapted to present needs and remoulded in modern form.

In this paper we have introduced some essential concepts. We encountered the idea of free space and its relevance for learning processes in organisations. We noted the interplay between free space and public space. We clarified the difference between instrumental and substantial rationality and the relationship between the latter and both the classical understanding of 'virtues' and modern views on dialogue.

In our book we successively focus on each of the liberal arts in turn: dialectics, the art of dialogue; rhetoric, the art of candid and persuasive speech; the relation of rhetoric to dialectics and the role of debate in organisations; and grammar, the art of formulation and good writing. After this we move on into ethics, the art of the good life and the mastery required for this. Finally we consider the public side of mastery, i.e. leadership, and the classical philosophical approach to appropriate schooling. The keynote for this chapter is Plato's conception of form and the need for philosophical depth in leaders. The book also contains selected study materials and practical tips, 'job aids' for the creation of free space and meaningful philosophical discourse.

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Erik Boers helped establish the Philosophy on the Job scheme during his studies in philosophy at the Free University, Amsterdam. To gain experience in the practice of management and organisation he started to train managers in a large electronics firm and moved on to a training and consulting bureau. From 1997 onwards he focused on development and application of philosophical methods in management training and management consulting. Together with Jos Kessels he established The New Trivium in 1999. Each year, Erik conducts a series of guest lectures entitled "Philosophising in organisations" at the Free University, Amsterdam.

Jos P. Kessels studied law and philosophy and has worked as a musician, journalist and lecturer in philosophy. He conducted research into the philosophy of science and into the didactics of philosophy focusing on the theory and practice of the Socratic Dialogue. He gained his doctorate in 1989 with a thesis in epistemology, and developmental research into philosophical didactics (Utrecht, 1989). From 1985 until 2000 he was a lecturer at the University of Utrecht. In 1990 he founded Dialogue Consultants, a private enterprise which applied the Socratic method in the corporate and business environments as well as in educational circles. He has conducted Socratic Dialogues in many organisations, analysing fundamental issues and initiated joint learning. He has published numerous articles and books over the last twelve years. In 1999 he and Erik Boers founded the New Trivium.

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