RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Ordinary Concept of Inspiration

Janning F*

United International Business School, Barcelona (UIBS), Spain.

*Corresponding Author: E-mail: *finn.janning@faculty.uibs.org*

Abstract

This paper presents an inquiry into the ontology of inspiration, that is, how we conceive the nature of inspiration. Prior attempts to explain inspiration often tend to refer to something abstract or divine. Instead, this paper argues for a more practical and immanent understanding of inspiration based on a small experiment revealing that 87% of business students associate inspiration with two components: Challenge and something 'unknown'. In light of this result, this paper discusses the organizational and managerial implication regarding, how to inspire the individual.

Keywords: *Affirmative practice, Experimental philosophy, Inspiration, Organizing.*

Introduction

The

concept of inspiration plays a significant role in today's business life. For a simple example, it is expected that managers and leaders should be able to inspire its workforce. Similar, a person can use inspiration either as something positive or negative to explain, how he did or didn't come-up with a new idea. "I wasn't inspired," or "I was inspired." Both answers might be plausible, but they don't give managers much to work with, that is, answering the question: "How can I inspire you?" In addition, some even suggest that the workforce in general should be able to inspire itself – in alignment with self-motivation. Thus, in a world that salutes creativity, innovation or just what we might call 'new', the concept of inspiration appears to be one very important aspect of modern business.[1] Most studies referring to inspiration tend to use examples from artist or divine sources, for instance, saying that artists or religious people are more open or sensitive towards the outside, that is, that which is not them. Still, it's rather difficult to say, whether artists or religious people simply are better at using what happens strategically, for instance, that the artist is good at composing interesting novels based on trivial issues, just as a religious person might interpret certain trivialities as divine signs. In such a situation, of course, the artist might be gifted with an x-ray vision, but one might also claim that the artist is a good storyteller. Yet, another more interesting hypothesis emerges, whether inspiration simply is the positive side-effect of how a life is organized. Thus, what is of importance is, how the artist or

the religious person organizes his or her life. Basically, because how one is living, affects how one thinks and feels, and vice versa.[2] So, the answer to the question: How to inspire and become inspired, therefore, seems to be a matter of organizing. My aim here is to provide experimental support for the last view that is, being inspired is not excluded for artist or religious people. On the contrary, becoming inspired is a way of life. Thus, the guiding hope is to arrive at an understanding of inspiration that might 'inspire' organizations and leaders to organise and lead differently.

Background and Method

Socrates once stated, 'the unexamined life is not worth living'.[3] Additionally, why not adapt Socrates' statement to work and suggest that the unexamined work is not worth doing. If nothing is at stake regarding knowledge, challenges, self-development, etc., then why bother. The point is clear: To examine a life, that is, to question and experiment with a life, is a way of producing meaning. Each form of life produces value by making more or less sense out of what happens. Meaning is here defined not by its referent such as a God or a normative ideal, but by its context, that is, by its use within a particular language-game.[4] Meaning is achieved through functional and productive interaction with other lives rather than connecting a word or an action to their respective object or goals. For instance, work makes sense when a person sees how he or she functions within

a particular context. Such sense of usability or functionality typically requires feedback from peers that can help a person to feel even more useful. One learns from all kinds of experiences – especially the less successful. Feedback invites one to ask new question in order to examine alternatives, or even invent new. All kind of human action signifies some norms, but that alone doesn't tell us anything.[5] instead, to find evidence for a claim, we have to describe *how* this point of reference is defined. The point is, not only to clarify why people say what they say, but also what they mean. Recent experiments have shown that the process of valuing involves moral judgment.[6] The question of interest here is, of course, whether this process of valuing solely is based on already *given* objective values, or rather is *constituted* in the exact same process. For a simple example, consider answering the following questions: How does the asked subjects ascribe value to its past? What makes the subjects ascribe certain things, persons or situations as inspiring instead of something else? What criteria's are at play? Answering such questions is very difficult. Circumstances that the subject might not even be aware of can affect his or her answer. The approach used in this paper is affirmative. The assumption is that what works basically works, because it functions. Thus, the focus is on what makes something possible, the being of becoming.[7] So, if the subject says that he or she was inspired, then this specific situation works for the person. If, I would ask whether such answer makes sense or not, then I was merely trying to confirm a norm or ideal of my own. In other words, affirming is a way of ascribing meaning to what happens. What works is affirmed. Experiments are a way of trying to understand the ordinary due to the willingness to question the common, the ordinary and the obvious, for instance, believing that inspiration is limited to artist or religious people. Similar, Slojterdijk asks: 'Could one not hold the view that life is a constant *a posteriori* testing of our knowledge about the space from which everything emanates?'[8]So, a philosopher has a method when doing experiments, but he or she doesn't know it in the beginning. The problem and the method pass one another due to the various movements and vibrations in our temporary web of more or less justified beliefs. It does what it needs to function. Also, this is what Socrates' meant when he stated that an unexamined life is not worth living. 'We write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border of what separates us our knowledge from our ignorance and transform the one into the other.'[9] The claim is simply that questions are underlying every kind of development. Yes, it is that simple.

And yet, apparently it is rather difficult to question the ordinary. At least, it seems like many raise pure strategic questions in order to reach a certain objective, or simply represent an already given knowledge.

The Experiment

The subjects of this experimental study were 37 undergraduate student of Business Administration from UIBS. I was interesting in getting information about how the subjects perceive inspiration, but also in what way inspiration worked for them. Each of the subjects was asked the following questions:
Recall the last time you felt inspired.
Describe the situation briefly.
What was inspirational about it?
How did 'being' inspired work?
The majority of the subject, 87% or 32 students, described the last time they felt inspired as related with individual growth, new challenges, a feeling of self-development. Many students mentioned moving to another country to study as being inspirational. Some mentioned travelling in other countries. However, 48% or 18 students referred to job-situations. Some of the examples are: being put into new situations, getting new assignments – often related with getting more responsibility, working with new colleges. Of importance, is the fact that many of the subjects didn't put themselves in these situations, that is to say, whether one chooses freely or kindly is forced to do a certain thing doesn't affect the experience of inspiration. Also, the same 48% emphasized that they didn't know what to expect. Thus, what was particular inspirational about it – for all of them – was the 'unknown' element. For instance, not knowing anyone, not knowing the language, being in an unknown country, city, or continent. Some readers might believe that curiosity is what attracts the subjects to the unknown, but such assumption only covers those who actually did choose freely. Furthermore, I don't think that curiosity as such is the crucial factor. On the other hand, those who was merely forced or strongly advised might equally have shown courage and fantasy. Such characteristics, I believe, seem much more paramount if one actually would end up doing something about his or her curiosity. Furthermore, when the subjects mentioned the absence of expectation, they stressed two opinions. One, not knowing what others might expect. Second, not knowing what to expect from oneself. In addition, when asked, all agreed that not knowing what to expect from oneself was the most inspiring. Several described it as a little scary. Thus, what was inspirational about the situation was this unknown element. Here, all 87 % of the students agreed. Based on this information, I

continued: How does inspiration work? This question is affirmative, because I am not trying to detect a certain meaning. The point is not to see whether the subjects represent an ideal or not, but simply to see, what works. Here the students described their own state in various, but positive ways. For instance, a feeling of being alive, uplifted, committed, alert, involved, attentive, scary (in a good way), feeling better, feeling good, energetic, highly motivated. Summarizing the results, the majority of the subjects have felt inspired. They described inspiration as something related to challenges, a conclusion that other studies have reached as well, for instance, emphasizing how the right balance between challenges and competencies constantly change. The more competent one is, the more difficult challenges are required to perform optimal.[10] This experiments, however, presents us with additional information emphasizing the relation between inspiration and something 'unknown'. It doesn't tell us how the optimal balance should be. Instead, inspiration emerges when a person is challenged in a way that activates unknown facets of the persons potential. Inspiration is something that happens in an encounter that actualizes something unknown. However, the unknown doesn't refer to something secretive deep inside a person. On the contrary, inspiration seems to emerge in-between emphasizing that all relations are external. According to this experiment, it happens when a person is put in a situation or place where it's no longer possible to rely solely on habits and expectations based on previous experience. A tentative conclusion is that being inspired is a matter of living on the edge of ones knowledge. Daring to confront it, that is to say, having the will to question ones own habits, beliefs and knowledge. This is interesting, because it brings us much closer to the concept of potential as a productive alternative to competencies. In the following I will discuss this suggestion.

Discussion and Suggestions

Some readers might be inclined to see the 'unknown' as being part of what is challenging, like a constant search for filling the gaps in our knowledge. To a certain degree, I agree. What is challenging about a challenge is the level of unpredictability. Still, I found the result interesting, because it addresses something far more existential, that is to say, what makes some people take the step into the unknown while others seem so keen at confirming status quo. Some suggestions are: curiosity, courage and fantasy. I addition, one might ask: "What to do about that?"–"How to cultivate curiosity, courage and fantasy?" I believe that the result can be seen –perhaps, not the only interpretation – as

addressing a need for an ethical approach, not a moralistic or value-based approach. The main difference between ethics and moral is that it addresses two different ways of emphasizing, what is of importance when dealing with a life worth living. Deleuze, for instance, uses morality to define a set of constraining rules and moral codes that are used in judging human behavior. Such rules or codes refer to transcendent values or norms. Ethics, on the other hand, is more like guiding rules that can help us evaluate what we feel, think, say and do. The claim is that 'we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts we deserves.'[11] Thus, if one doesn't feel inspired, then organize your life differently. Another way of illustrating the difference is that the normative reflections of moral suggest that 'ought' or 'should' implies 'can'. Basically saying, if an organization says somebody 'ought' to do something, then the organization must suppose that it is something the workforce can do. It is obvious that many norms are based on values or ideals that are not humanly possible. Contrary to this, an ethical question would be, what might be possible? For a simple example, competencies are guided by two rules: resemblance and limitation. For instance, being competent resemble what this competence is expected to realize. A competent, business leader is expected to lead a business organization competent. Similar, limitations are limitations according to what is expected. A more useful distinction is between potential and actualization.[12] Potential refers to something real, but still unknown, that is, something yet to be actualized. Hereby I lay stress on the relation between the potential of each human being and the 'unknown' factor that inspired. Basically, I suggest that to inspire is to actualize what we still don't know. And it is exactly because we don't know it that we tend to describe inspiration by referring to religion or art. However, there is nothing magical about it other than to keep on questioning our ignorance. Ignorance seems to be far more important for a person's intellectual growth, than focusing on what he or she already knows. Trying to summarize, a high ideal might inspire, however, such an ideal might also hinder how a person chooses to organize ones life. The reason to avoid any kind of restraint is basically that we still don't know, what a human being is capable of. So, the way I interpret the result from this little experiment is that we don't need new or higher values or norms, but the courage and fantasy to affirm that which works. Courage to cross the frontiers of knowledge, but also the fantasy to imagine how new challenges that we don't know of might emerge. In practice this requires a form of leadership style that rejects

nothing and confirms everything. In other words, don't lead to rigidly according to well-established ideals or norm or values. It takes courage. So, instead of using already given values as a guide of reference, then values are produces by facilitating a certain form of life, that is to say, facilitating a space to become. Why, one might ask. Basically, because it's the form of life lived by the individuals that create new organizational values. A form of life that constantly test ones conviction instead of just attacking other's belief is not only a courageous life, but also a life that imagine growth is possible. How to facilitate? The style of leadership needed is rather affirmative, because it's constantly trying to affirm that what works. Affirming the values produced that opens up for new challenging questions. The aim for an affirmative practice, of course, is constantly bringing the workforce to its limits by affirming the moment when the subject in this experiment says yes, that is, the moment when they feel uplifted, highly motivated, etc. Perhaps, it is not really leadership that is needed, but someone who is able to notice what is worth affirming. Deleuze says, 'To affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives.'[13] Set people free by actualizing the values produced when they feel most inspired.

Conclusion

Although, what I have presented here is based on a minor experiment, one might still ask, whether it addresses a general tendency. To start with, it shows that inspiration emerges on the edge of our knowledge. This is not new knowledge. Yet, I believe that the study not only emphasize, but also strengthen the need for a more affirmative approach in order to organize a life on the frontiers of ones knowledge, that is to say, the being of becoming. Here more courage is needed. So, the only semi-normative conclusion possible is that organizations should affirm what works. It might sound like a quick fix. However, I hope that I have both achieved to underline how difficult it is, but also described why it might be worth trying.

References

1. Boltanski L, Chiapello E (2007) The New Spirit of Capitalism. Trans. by G. Elliott. Verso.

2. Studies in Positive Psychology have shown that the way we live affects how we think and feel, and vice versa. For a recent summarizing account, see Seligmann, M. 2011. Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being – And How to Achieve Them. Nicolas Brealey Publishing.

3. Plato 2002. Apology, 38a. In Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo. Trans. by G.M.A. Grube. Hackett Publishing Co, Inc,

4. Wittgenstein L (2009) Philosophical Investigations. Trans. G.E.M. Anscobe, P.M.S. Hacker & J. Schulte. Wiley-Blackwell

5. Ibid., p. 10.

6. Knobe J, Roedder E (2009) The Ordinary Concept of Valuing. Philosophical Issues 19(1):131-47.

7. Deleuze G (2002) Nietzsche and Philosophy. Trans. by H. Tomlinson. Continnum.

8. Sloterdijk P (2011) Bubbles: Spheres I, p. 10. Trans. by W. Hoban. Semiotext (e).

9. Deleuze G (1994) Difference and Repetition, p. Xxii. Trans. by P. Patton. Columbia University Press.

10. Csikszentmihalyi M (2007) Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience. Harper Collins.

11. Deleuze G (2002) Nietzsche and Philosophy, p. 1. Trans. by H. Tomlinson. Continnum.

12. Deleuze G (1991) Bergsonism. Trans. by H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam. Zone Books.

13. Deleuze G (2002) Nietzsche and Philosophy, p. 185. Trans. by H. Tomlinson. Continnum.