

Interview with Nigel Laurie (part 1)

Tim LeBon

Nigel Laurie is a founder member of the SCP and a philosophical consultant in management who has worked as a management consultant for over 20 years. He has provided a wide range of services including management development, coaching, teambuilding and assistance at managing change in organisation structures and cultures. He has worked in the UK, USA, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Nigel has recently been appointed the SCP's honorary management consultant. Nigel kindly agreed to be interviewed for Practical Philosophy, which hopefully will be part of the process of the rest of us learning from his vast experience in organisations. Tim LeBon began by asking Nigel how he came to be a philosophical consultant in management.

Nigel Laurie: I trained as a philosopher at Glasgow and Guelph in Canada, where I did some teaching. A look at the PhD output figures for North American universities alone suggested academic jobs would be scarce. So I decided to go into business without delay since I saw no career benefit in pursuing a PhD at that time. My early career included a term as Business Manager of an arts publishing firm in Edinburgh where I enjoyed setting up the business side. I moved to IBM as a Systems Engineer which drew on my business experience and—as I came to realise—my philosophy training in thinking holistically and conceptually. I worked also in communications in IBM (helping run internal staff surveys) and as a Publications Manager. In 1977 I set up my own consultancy specialising in communication and people issues.

In a way I have always been a philosophical consultant but for many years the philosophical element has been more implicit than explicit. By this I mean that philosophical skills and approaches informed my work (I hope) rather than forming the overt content. I think those with legal training have a similar experience. For example, when exploring the meaning of leadership with managers I have practised conceptual analysis. When discussing communication skills I touch on the idea of linguistic acts without necessarily using the term. When thinking about decision making talk naturally turns to the importance of criteria. And, when exploring communication skills and communication breakdowns (across cultures, say) I point to the importance of differing assumptions and conceptual schemes. A training in philosophy is possibly a good preparation for managers planning to work in cultures besides their own. I certainly found it helped me when discussing questions of managerial authority with native Chinese managers in China a few years ago.

So that is how I have been a philosophical consultant in management. With my renewed involvement in philosophy I can see myself doing philosophy more overtly both in work with organisations and in thinking about management. Whatever the context, I will aim to use philosophical approaches, skills and techniques in ways which are accessible to managers as well as effective with them.

Tim LeBon: Two things you've said echo my own experience and perhaps that of other readers—first, never stopping doing philosophy in some way, whatever one's profession, and second one's desire to use philosophy more explicitly. It sounds like in management there are a relatively large number of opportunities to use philosophical skills and knowledge. The million dollar question is—do your client's realise philosophy's worth? What would you say to them to convince them of the value of philosophy?

I think I would try and do two things. First, remind them that they think philosophically already and that this would be more effective if done with greater skill and awareness. For instance, when discussing the ethics of influencing in organisations with managers, I relate their views to different positions in ethics e.g. utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based approaches. Mapping the options in these terms has helped the managers I have worked with to better articulate and reflect on the nature of the choices they were trying to make intuitively. In this first approach I am bringing managers closer to philosophy and introducing them to terms and frameworks from within the philosophical tradition.

My second approach would be to bring philosophy closer to the manager in the form of dialogues designed for their circumstances. I would design a dialogue to help address a problem or issue they were trying to work through. As in assessing the potential benefits of exercise, the best approach is to try it out for yourself.

If I'm asked what a consultant philosopher can offer I'd say: some keys to improve your performance and that of your organisation. The consultant philosopher is firstly a person trained to think effectively. They can help you do the same when pressures and conflicts make it difficult. Indeed if this were all the consultant offered it would still add significant value—the quality of our thinking affects the quality of everything we do. The consultant philosopher's knowledge can help in analysing issues and framing solutions by drawing on the concepts and insights generated by over 2000 years of philosophy. The consultant philosopher can offer significant value by bringing philosophical skills to the treatment of all the core management issues such as leadership and its responsibilities, the role of the organisation in society, the nature of work, the problems of reconciling conflicting stakeholder interests and so forth. Finally the consultant philosopher offers a range of organisational interventions. These range from individual philosophical counselling to help managers make more effective decisions and choices to group and organisation-wide dialogues helping generate shared knowledge and values, mutual understanding across disciplines and more effective working together.

An example from my own experience concerned a manager feeling under pressure to choose between two equally attractive alternatives. Counselling him it became clear that he did not in fact have to choose at all, whatever he may have felt. And using de Bono's technique of identifying not just pros and cons but also the 'interesting' for each option liberated him to defer action and reach a more effective choice at a more appropriate time. Since the issue involved a strategy for technology he avoided the risk of locking his organisation into a dead end.

So philosophers, and consultant philosophers in particular, have plenty to offer organisations. But what, other than money, have organisations to offer philosophers? What would you say to philosophers to convince them that they should get involved in organisations?

I think philosophers who need to be persuaded to get involved in organisations probably shouldn't. They must want to. Desire is as important for effective action as Plato thought it was for effective knowledge. To those who want to get involved I would say: prepare for a steep learning curve and be ready to respect what Edmund Burke once called "the density of the human medium".

Allied to this you will need to be sensitive to the ways in which rationality, the human psyche and power interact (not least in yourself). Your sources for this understanding include Thucydides, Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Foucault. Useful case studies that come immediately to mind include Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lola*. You might also consult Antony Jay's *Yes Minister* and some of Andrew Pettigrew's work such as *Implementing Strategic Decisions*. In short, you had better get used to the idea that whenever two or three people are gathered together in an organisation there is almost always politics as well as reason.

These texts and others will not make you cynical. They are an antidote to cynicism by countering any tendency to the arrogance and naivete of the purely rational. Of course philosophers know all this but they had better, in Keats' phrase, know it on their pulses.

I would also suggest to philosophers: acquire the knack of relating philosophical thinking to management issues in management terms. See yourselves as intellectual entrepreneurs, bringing together two fields many of whose members feel to be poles apart. An example of this is Jos Kessels' relating socratic dialogue to the learning organisation. Another is my attempt to express T H Scanlon's ideas in terms meaningful to those debating stakeholding in management.

That's useful advice. There will be some consultant philosophers who resist moving in to management because they do not like wearing a suit, and it's probably good that such people do not try to adjust. They would also find they had to get used to deeper differences between academia and business such as the importance of politics as well as reason (though having written that I wonder if the differences are so great !). The other side of the coin is that consultant philosophers have to adapt to talking in ideas and language that managers appreciate, for instance one might say "I trained as a philosopher" rather than "I studied philosophy" and talk of "dilemma training" rather than "ethical theories". Nigel, I'd like to conclude the first part of this interview by asking you for your own perspective on the theme of this issue, "The use and value of philosophy" – what's your view?

I think the value and use of philosophy are best demonstrated rather than asserted, certainly when seeking to convince managers in organisations.

I think there are two levels at which philosophy is useful and valuable. The more superficial is the more apparent: the application of philosophical approaches

and techniques to day to day issues e.g. medical ethics, the framing of ethical codes, policy choices, and the like. But I think the more important contribution of philosophy will be at a deeper level.

Perhaps I can illustrate this best by an example. When we ask what managers are responsible for, the answer is usually couched in terms of the delivery of economic and other goods. These may comprise shareholder value, a financial surplus to fund future activities, the delivery of health care, the provision of information services, the distribution of safe food. What interests me about this question are the presuppositions that lie behind the way it is interpreted and answered. The organisation which carries out these tasks and which managers manage is conceived as an instrumental body composed of atomistic selves. This presupposes that there is no such thing as an irreducibly social good brought into being by the organisation itself. I think many of the problems we have in understanding and thinking through what managers are responsible for flows from this inadequate view of what an organisation is. I think it parallels the view we have of the self within the liberal tradition which is atomistic and disengaged.

So—besides its inherent value about which I'm quite clear—philosophy's greatest use and value, I think would be in excavating the assumptions that lie behind management thinking, exposing them, criticising them and hopefully reformulating them in more defensible terms. As Kurt Lewin said many years ago, there is nothing so useful as a good theory. This is a very long term project—the liberal tradition has taken several hundred years to reach its present social instantiation. But I think it is the task for philosophers interested in organisations and management today.

What I am saying is that to be of greatest practical help philosophers need to be prepared to address deep theoretical issues in a rigorous and unapologetically philosophical way. I have written a manifesto to this effect which will appear in a journal I am starting later this year.

I'd like to ask you about specific philosophical techniques you use in organisations. Firstly, do you use Socratic Dialogue, and if so how?

I have used Socratic Dialogue in an informal and concise way to help team learning. So used, it generated new knowledge for the group and sharpened their skills at thinking together. I also developed a dialogue form for new managers drawing on both Socratic Dialogue and philosophical enquiry techniques. I will be presenting a paper on this to the July conference. Later this year I will be helping facilitate a series of forums or enquiries to help a large organisation define its leadership needs for the future.

I'm interested and encouraged by the existence of varied approaches to dialogue—at least so far as duration is concerned, from one day in the US to one to two days in the Netherlands and up to two weeks in Germany! (I have experienced the US and Netherlands approaches and can see value in each when skilfully handled.) I am interested in the way Jos Kessels in the Netherlands has developed variations of the Socratic Dialogue for groups larger than the usual 6–12 and also over shorter periods. I also like his idea of splitting a dialogue into modules spread over several days. This makes sense for busy managers.

Has philosophical counselling got any place in organisations?

When I described philosophical counselling to one client recently she exclaimed "But you have been doing this for years!" Certainly managers like everyone else face issues which philosophical counselling can help them address: personal choices and decisions and also organisational ones. The functional dimension to organisational life convinces me that philosophical counselling and dialogue can be immensely fruitful here—helping managers mobilise their rationality while remaining sensitive to the emotional hinterland of thought.

The picture that is emerging for me is that the consultant philosopher will have a number of techniques in his or her toolbox, and will apply the ones appropriate to the organisation and situation. Do the methods of philosophical enquiry have a place in organisations too?

Yes, certainly in my experience and in what I have read. Catherine McCall in Glasgow has conducted communities of enquiry with executives. I ran a dialogue with new managers structured like an enquiry and it proved to be very useful. I didn't call it a Socratic Dialogue or philosophical enquiry, simply a dialogue. At this stage labels are not so important. We need to focus on developing tools that work with managers.

Roger Sutcliffe—Chair of SAPERE—has a very exciting ambition: to have communities of enquiry within organisations provide forums in which the members can meet as a community to reflect upon common concerns. In most organisations, the task focus and functional divisions are so strong that the common 'public' space has atrophied. I think he is on to something very important here.

That really would be bringing practical philosophy into the workplace. I'm certainly getting a sense of excitement about the future of philosophy in organisations, but of course first we have to convince our clients i.e. managers. One way into their mindset is to consider what management literature they read. I don't suppose it's Plato, and I don't suppose it's *Practical Philosophy* either!

According to the *Financial Times* (and my own observation) a lot of managers are reading 'Dilbert'. It reported *The Dilbert Principle* to be the best selling management book of 1998. However, managers learn and keep up to date in many ways such as networking, attending conferences and courses and learning on the job through techniques such as action learning, coaching and mentoring. I'm not sure how much of what they read makes a powerful impact. Few in my experience refer to books in conversation about the issues they are dealing with. However, there are exceptions. Books referred to by clients in conversations with me include Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (on systems thinking and organisational learning), Peter Schwarz's *The Art of the Long View* (about scenario planning), Peter Drucker's *The Leader of the Future* (an anthology of articles), Charles Handy's *The Empty Raincoat* and Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats*. De Bono appeals to managers for his clarity, concreteness and very pragmatic approach. The thinking hats with its use of colours brings out important aspects of thinking in ways which can be grasped intuitively and be put into productive practice very quickly. I have certainly found this to be so when I have used the thinking hats myself with groups. De Bono seems to me to be a very effective communicator as well as

stimulating thinker. Tom Peters' *In Search of Excellence*—the first of the modern management best-sellers—was on everybody's lips in the eighties and is still mentioned occasionally.

I know that not all of these "management gurus" meet with your approval—Senge in particular ...

Yes, the thrust of Senge's approach is at the level of emotion and he appears to misunderstand and discount the contribution of rationality. I believe this all flows from failures or shortcomings in his theory of dialogue which is built on a flawed conception of meaning and knowledge.

So what ought to be read by managers?

Part of the problem in recommending books is that, as many business school professors will acknowledge, we really do not know what makes a successful manager, though I think focusing on the competencies required to fulfil certain roles is a helpful development. So what I say to managers when they ask what they should read is to draw their attention to the classic textbooks and key writers. I suggest they sample as many as they can and then read more fully those who most readily engage their attention. Writers I like include Peter Drucker, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, John Kay, Donald Schon, and from a much earlier era, Mary Parker Follett who was saying in the 1920s and 1930s what we still need to heed today. Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organisation* is a very fascinating study of the different metaphors that can be applied to analyse organisations. One part treats organisations as psychic prisons and Plato's cave gets a mention. It is really a very philosophical book.

And are there any "straight" philosophy books that you would recommend to managers ?

Managers might profit from reading some Socratic Dialogues and engaging not only with the philosophical questions Socrates tackles but also with the existential and moral choices he himself thought through so lucidly. It's easy to forget that Socrates was much more than a philosopher. With his ability to cope with the rigours of battle as an infantryman, his flair for communication, clarity of thought, awareness of his strengths and weaknesses and sheer moral courage, Socrates has a lot to offer any manager as a role model. And his refusal to flee the Athenian legal process to save his life raises some interesting thoughts about the ethics of offshore operations and transfer pricing by multinationals.

Anthony O'Hear's *What Philosophy Is* offers a very thorough and unpatronising introduction. Any manager willing to work at it could gain a lot and then go on perhaps to read some of the classics such as Plato, Aristotle and Kant on ethics. Other philosophers I think managers might find engaging include Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue* deals with the manager as a distinctive modern character) and the more accessible parts of Charles Taylor's work (e.g. a recent paper on entrepreneurs and the CBC Lectures, *The Ethics of Authenticity* which deal with instrumental reason among other issues). Some might find Iris Murdoch's writings congenial and illuminating (e.g. about the disembodied modern self) and Mary

Midgeley writes clearly about matters close to managerial concerns. From what I have read of it they should certainly read Martha Nussbaum's new book *Cultivating Humanity*. Those managers who pride themselves on being macho might pause at Thomas Nagel's *Mortal Questions* and read Chapter 6 on 'Ruthlessness in Public Life'. And I think every manager should read John Dunn's *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*. Those who feel supremely confident that there will be a future to face might get a wake-up call from John Leslie's *The End of the World: The Science and Ethics of Human Extinction*. Although its central statistical argument—the "Doomsday Argument"—has been persuasively criticised in *Mind*, the telling empirical points he calmly advances desperately call for action focused on the global common good. There are also numerous books on applied ethics in business, medicine and the like.

A fascinating book I have just read is Bent Flyvbjerg's *Rationality and Power*. This describes how reason interacted with power over several years in a town planning project in Denmark. The very rich account—a blow by blow, factual narrative—shows how reason is used and misused by different players in the political game including the Technical Department of the Council, the Chamber of Commerce, residents' associations, the police, and so forth. The book concludes with a chapter offering a theory of rationality grounded in practical experience. Most managers will recognise the stratagems described but would benefit from the philosophical framework for understanding what goes on in organisations. It would probably improve their influencing skills as well!

That sounds like a pretty good reading list for any prospective philosophical consultant in management as well as managers themselves. I imagine giving advice like this is part of your new role as honorary management consultant to the SCP. How do you see your role?

I hope I can be useful to the Society in at least three ways. First, by assisting the management committee when managerial questions arise such as drawing up a constitution, deciding how best to position the Society to its publics and developing a long-term business plan. Second, by being available to members who would like to explore how to develop their career as philosophers in management. And third, by using my management development experience to help the Society ensure the models and training they endorse will equip members to meet the needs of organisations.

But I'm open to any further suggestions about my role!

I'm sure that like me you are looking forward to the Conference in Oxford in July. Have you any specific hopes with regards to the Conference?

Since I am speaking at the Conference I can safely say that the value of conferences comes less from listening to speakers than from meeting colleagues! I hope this Conference will create many new networks. I hope it will help managers see just how powerful a tool philosophy can be. I hope it will encourage non-doctrinaire and exploratory approaches among consultant philosophers, a willingness to be eclectic and develop models and procedures focused on the needs of organisations. And I hope it will provoke genuine dissent because movements tend to be

strongest when they have constructive dissent to animate them. I hope we will not end up like the logical positivists—replacing "nonsense" with nonsense!

And looking well past July, all the way forward to the next millennium, what are your personal hopes for philosophy in organisations?

I think it was in 1984 that there was a so called 'Industry Year' in the UK. At that time Prince Philip, the patron, announced on the radio that he hoped the British people would become more businesslike and get into line with the requirements of industry. I felt strongly then—and still feel—that the real need is not to make people more businesslike but to make business more humane and human. I felt that the biggest task in management was to bring it into touch with the whole western intellectual and moral tradition from which it has, I think, come adrift. And I felt we needed to help managers become more aware as managers that they are not merely makers of the new but heirs to over 2000 years of sustained thought about how we ought to organise our lives. In this connection I find Cornelius Castoriadis' comment that "capitalism is living by exhausting sediments of previous norms and values" chillingly apt.

There is rightly much talk of protecting the physical environment and many managers in my experience spend much time and energy trying to address the problem. But there is a social and moral ecosystem we need to sustain also. More managers in business need to put this on the agenda. One senior executive, Yves Newbould, who was a Director of Hanson and then a non-executive Director of BT has remarked that she was never called on as a director to debate issues from an ethical or moral standpoint.

My hope is that by reaching out to managers, philosophers will enable and empower them to operate as fully reflective and self-aware persons—natural managers we might call them—rather than people who when they go to work can be trapped by a rhetoric and set of beliefs about people and work which are alien to the best of themselves and alienating to others. The last decade or so has been like the 1920s in its innocence, gaiety and greed. If things go in phases then I think people may be ready for the productive reflection philosophy can promote. The scale of the global problems we have to resolve certainly calls for it.

When working in organisations philosophers will do well to keep two points in mind. First, we are offering organisations a set of insights, tools and ways of thinking to help them be more effective, not religion or a set of doctrines. Be pragmatic in developing approaches that actually deliver for managers and don't worry too much at this stage about being pure and loyal to some assumed sacred model. There are already several different ways of doing what is called Socratic Dialogue, for instance. I am sure there will be scope for several new variations. Listening to one's clients is vital.

Secondly, and perhaps paradoxically, never forget the value of theory (Kurt Lewin again). Practical philosophers are uniquely qualified to help managers work with better theories about the fundamentals of their work such as motivation, the nature of the person, the nature of organisations and work, the basis of management legitimacy and so forth. This work will involve uncovering presuppositions, excavating them, critiquing them and hopefully helping build more tenable ones. For example, if managers have an incoherent view of human

motivation their practice surely cannot be as effective as it would be with a tenable view of why people behave as they do. Management motivation is basically Humean in its assumptions and this is, to say the least, arguable. Among many others, Jonathan Dancy's book *Moral Reasons* is relevant here as is Bob Brecher's *Getting What You Want?*

To manage better, we're going to have to think better. Consultant philosophers are ideally placed to help bring this about.

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