

Review of *The Philosophical Foundations of Management*

by Jean-Etienne Joullie and Robert Spillane

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I recall when I was getting my MBA, as I was taught the tricks and trade of modern business, I wonder how the professors knew this material and how they developed it. Simply put, modern business education, at undergraduate, masters and doctoral level, remains ignorant of the principles of philosophy that they are based on. Because of this ignorance, there has been a call over the years by historians, such as Steven Conn, for management to consider the principles of liberal arts. Professors Joullie and Spillane have answered this clarion call with a very well-written erudite book on the philosophical foundations of management thought. This book should be on the bookshelf of every management professor, indeed some actual managers. There are dozens of thought-provoking insights in this book.

Before I begin my review proper, I would like to note the following: Dr Joullie is on the editorial board and has published several articles in this journal. Likewise, Dr Joullie and I are also members of the Tacitus forum.

Management, as a profession, is in deep trouble. Management and related fields, such as entrepreneurship, has largely produced a world of bounty and has been the force that has lifted millions of people above subsistence levels. Despite this amazing performance management, and by extension, other business professions and practices have been criticized for ethical and technical failings. The business curriculum teaches managers to be completely rational and logical machines relying on statistics at the expense of observation. In the process, as the authors demonstrate, produced what Henry Mintzberg describes as a combination of both “arrogance” and “incompetence.”

The charge of management using too much technical observations is an old one as critics such as Jeffrey Pfeffer, Robert Sutton and Dennis Tourish has written extensively about this issue. However, perceptive to those criticisms, Joullie and Spillane have a solution – philosophy. In fact, I would go further and suggest liberal arts. The use of philosophy, history, literature and art to develop strong critical thinkers who demonstrate both technical ability and actual empathy toward employees to understand the bigger picture. Based on this, the authors of this book make their theories come to life with writing about figures as disparate as Dr House and Abraham Lincoln.

Their philosophical approach stands in deep contrast to Pfeffer’s and Sutton’s recommendation on the building of both theory and evidence to lead to an “evidence-based management.” This attitude, borrowed from medicine, preaches the use of current information and best practices in management decisions. However, doctors, unlike



management professors, understand that medicine, like other applied fields such as management, is more art than real science. Doctors often must use intuition and understanding to develop useful remedies. Joulle and Spillane provide a useful template; encourage managers and students to consider themselves philosophers. Such as Peter Drucker, for example, who made crucial contributions to management without the benefit (or curse) of a social science background.

This attitude stands in direct opposition to the modern business school approach that is based upon the principles of scientific rigor. This attitude came from critical reports by the Ford and Carnegie Foundations which argued that the business school was bereft of intellectual rigor. Another explanation can come from the fact that operations management (e.g. management science or Fordism) and economics are highly quantitative and are driven by formal analysis usually through mathematics. Like management, sociology also underwent a similar physics envy as scholars such as Talcott Parsons and George Homans sought to build theory and then use mathematics to make their theorizing more formal. Modern business education and research is driven by this principle. Imagine citing Shakespeare or Plato in an article. How gauche!

Joulle and Spillane argue that science is too blunt an instrument to understand management. For example, we tell our students that successful business has resources and that all firms should seek out resources to compete. This is the common approach to the resource-based review of the firm. But as Priem and Butler have pointed out, this attitude is a tautology: successful firms are successful. Tautologies are common in management or they produce findings which are both obvious (e.g. job satisfaction to performance) or completely impractical (psychological empowerment to all workers). Another major issue is that our research is divorced from reality. Joulle and Spillane provide a long overview of journal articles titles illustrating this point. Try explaining the relevance of these titles to a manager or a student.

However, sometimes the criticisms in the book venture too far. An example would be the comments on psychology. Modern psychology is a complex field with no overreaching paradigm. Some psychologists place high emphasis on free will; others, such as B.F. Skinner, deny it. A debate between a cognitive psychologist and a social psychologist would be fruitless because of the differing approaching. The authors provide several criticisms. First, psychology does not downplay social forces, but rather it recognizes from the time of William James that behavior is a function of internal and external forces. Second, the authors of the book are dismissive of personality psychology (and presumably cognitive psychology) because of the use of latent variables. I disagree; even physics has latent variables. Latent are not tautological, and there is more precision in them than the authors' claim.

I am also sure readers will disapprove of Lincoln as a Machiavellian leader. However, where this book succeeds, and does so brilliantly, is to force the reader to think about management in a different way. In fact, like other thoughtful works, it encourages readers to think of questions that the authors do not address. For example, how did management get to this state? Hopefully, Joulle and Spillane will take the charge.

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