

Challenging Organisations and Society

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Leadership That Counts

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Tom Brown and Gary Wagenheim

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Proofreading: Deborah Starkey

Layout: www.kronsteiner-lohmer.at

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Heesoon Bai, David Chang, and Avraham Cohen

When the Immeasurable Leads: A Pedagogical Dialogue

Abstract

This article offers the concept of the immeasurable as an antidote to the hegemonic presence of the measurable and its contributions of dehumanization to the current civilization. We propose that the right balance of the immeasurable and the measurable, wherein the former takes priority, is a pressing educational goal in all spheres of institutional and organizational settings and life. We discuss and describe the process way of working with the immeasurable. We provide illustrations of our points and case-making with real life examples from the authors' professional work in schools, psychotherapy practice, and graduate teaching and student supervision. We demonstrate how we integrate the immeasurable in our work through dialogue, contemplative practices, and deep democracy.

Keywords: Measurement, the immeasurable, quantification, objectivity, empiricism, intersubjectivity, democracy, dialogue

Preamble

Much has been written about the hurts and damage perpetrated on humans, animals, and the biosphere itself as a result of human adherence to worldviews that include positivism, empiricism, rationalism, progressivism, materialism, industrialism, liberalism, anthropocentrism, and instrumentalism (Berry, 2006; Macy, 2007). While distinct on one theoretical level, these philosophical views all stand on a common foundation known as Modernism, the inception of which traces to the 17th century with the confluence of humanism and scientific materialism (Borgmann, 1993; Usher & Edwards, 1994). These combined doctrines put forth a picture of the world

as knowable, predictable, and controllable through a human cognition that excels in naming, counting, measuring, and manipulating the world; such capabilities have been applied to the conquest and exploitation of the planet in the service of human progress.

Entering the 21st century, many thoughtful theorists and seers are making a compelling argument that humanity's big experiment, Modernism, has failed insofar as it has resulted in a deeply hurt and devastated world. Signs of destruction are increasingly hard to ignore; at the same time, we struggle to get ourselves out of this Venus flytrap. The three authors of this chapter, veritable Socratic gadflies, are meeting to dialogue about the nature of this trap, prospects of escape, and the kind of escape effort that each of us as educational leaders in institutions of higher learning has been making.

LET'S GIVE THE IMMEASURABLE A TRY!

Heesoon: Colleagues, it is hard to know what to focus on in order to tackle the gargantuan problems of the 21st century. Many frankly believe, as you know, that it's too late, and that humanity is on a now inevitable, self-destruct course. Indeed, this may be the case, but in this world where complexity and chaos dynamics seem to operate, there is always a chance that we may hit the right nerve endings, like a skilled acupuncturist, and initiate a whole series of changes that will reverse the self-destructive course.

Avraham: That's right! I recall the words of my father: "The difficult will take some time. The impossible will take a little longer." I recall some other words from my dad when I was quite ill and very unhappy: "You can't give up. You have to fight!"

Heesoon: That's the spirit! May your father's spirit be with us as we engage with the impossible. Regarding not giving up the fight, I am reminded of the late paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould's words (1993):

...we cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love (but only appreciate in some abstract sense). [...] we must have visceral contact in order to love. We really must make room for nature in our hearts. (p. 39)

Thankfully there is increasing consensus that environmental degradation and ecosystem's destruction determines human survival. If the ecosystem can't carry and support what humans are doing, then it has the final say. Since the industrialism that modern humanity has been serving for the past two hundred years is directly related to conspicuous consumption, itself a consequence of accelerated production, I believe industrialism along with hegemony of the measurability culture needs to be phased out. Of course, people will say: "You're dreaming! Another one of those crazy idealists! Industrialism is as firmly established in the world as the Rocky Mountains! There is no way we can phase out or wipe out a mountain range like the Rockies."

But industrialism is not like the Rocky Mountains. Industrialism is just a worldview. It's an idea, however complexly and pervasively enacted, a *way of seeing* ourselves and our world. Worldviews are conceptualizations—constructs, comprised of habits of heart and desires. Constructs are not part of the empirical world. They exist within human consciousness. However, they are most powerful in that they move us to create an empirical world. If we want to challenge industrialism, then we need to make fundamental changes to the way we understand and see the world. We need to change the blueprint in our minds.

Avraham: I would add that, as a psychotherapist, I have learned from experience that "changing our minds," as Heesoon put it, is really about identifying the edges of one's way of being, going into the unknown, and transforming one's identity. Let's take a look the features of this problematic *identity*, then try to usher in a new consciousness; we cannot merely settle for less

problematic identities, because that is really not an option. Transformational work – that which will heal ourselves and our planet--is what is required.

Heesoon: While there are innumerable possible entry points for beginning the complex, daunting work of transformation, I believe that some are more likely to trigger a cascade of changes than others. As many have pointed out, one of the main philosophical tenets that undergird industrialism is mind-body/matter dualism, and I propose that we make that our point of entry for transformational work. Descartes and his company (e.g., John Locke, Francis Bacon) gave a categorical separation between mind and matter, reducing the latter to a category of lifeless “stuff” that can be exploited and discarded without concern for what some might call collateral damage (Bauman, 2011). Whatever is seen as not having mind, by definition, is matter, and thus, according to this script, available for exploitation. Matter, according to Descartes, only has extension, meaning that it occupies space, and can be therefore *measured and counted*. And, according to the empiricist worldview, only that which we can measure and count, thereby control, actually count (pun intended) towards valid knowledge. This is the appeal of modern science: that it makes *control* and *domination* possible and this is all too often the paradigm from within which industry leaders are conducting business and leading organizations.

David: To pick up on your thoughts on the empiricist worldview, I think the widespread credibility of the physical sciences has influenced many epistemologies. Impressed by the accuracy and applicability of scientific discoveries, many disciplines that traditionally hail from the humanities began to appropriate scientific methods. Widespread enthusiasm over modern science as epistemology *par excellence* has produced *scientific* discourses that are full of the trappings of science but that nevertheless misapprehend both the nature of empiricism and the subjects of investigation.

Advocates of measurement likely aspire to the putative objectivity of science; they hold that claims about reality are only reliable in relation to the objectivity of the investigation. Only objects are amenable to objective study. If

every problem looks like a nail to the person holding a hammer, then many a phenomenon must appear an “object” to the objective investigator. If phenomena are not easily objectified, or “thingified,” then at least certain attributes of the phenomena might be construed as objects, rendered measurable and thus quantifiable. The distortion lies not in the act of measurement, but rather in the reduction of the investigator’s subject from that of living reality to inert article, from vivid complexity to staid simplicity.

Heesoon: Right! In my remonstrance against measurability, I’m not arguing that nothing is measurable. Indeed, we can *make* anything measurable. First, we make a thing measurable by “thingifying” it. For instance, how would we thingify love? Love is not a thing: not an object in the way we usually experience it. Love is a shorthand name given to subjective experience that is all about quality, not quantity. Yet, in the interest of measurement, we could objectify love and give it measurable properties, such as frequency of hugs, number of smiles, rise of heartbeats, and so on. That is, we can come up with these behavioral markers in as complex or simple and comprehensive or esoteric a way as we want. Once love has been empirically treated, then the markers are open to measurement.

Avraham: When our experiences are measured out, explained away, then what’s captured and what remains? Data? I noticed, even in my psychotherapy field, that data talk is pervasive and dominant. Why this fascination with data? Especially in a field that deals primarily with qualia, that is, what is phenomenologically experienced and described as qualities? I believe the problem is not measurement *per se*; it is the confusion between what is measured and what is experienced. For example, knowing the brain chemistry that occurs during experience is not the same as knowing the actual experience with its associated feelings. All too often the data is confused with the human experience it underlies.

David: This is my tentative response to your question, “Why this fascination with data?”: Data-driven measurement promises clarity and insight; numbers appear to crystalize patterns and outcomes otherwise mired in turbid

complexity. Currently, the operating logic of many institutions requires such data to guide institutional activity – measurements have become features of systems that necessitate the production and consumption of data, which serve the self-governing processes of the institutional apparatus. In education, grades demark a student's achievement, and by extension, her intelligence, work ethic, employability, even character. Measurement and quantification, at the institutional level, serves primarily the smooth flow of bureaucratic operations. The person, in all her unique strengths, talents and capabilities, is condensed to a number; she becomes a unit that is easily managed by the apparatus. This production and consumption of data can become a defining function of institutions, where the pursuit of results supplants the original purpose of the institution.

As a high school teacher, I have seen how the publication of average scores in English 12 can exert an influence on teachers' evaluative practices. Some teachers inflate students' class scores in order to maximize the possibility of favorable final marks after the provincial exam scores have been accounted for. Other teachers may spend inordinate amounts of time preparing students for the exam — a dubious pedagogy that neglects the nobler aspirations of education. These examples illustrate the ways in which quantitative metrics can subvert the original purpose of the organization.

Heesoon: I have a similar observation to make, too. Today, brain science infiltrates and guides many domains of human activity, especially in the sphere of learning. I am not a brain science person, but with so many of my colleagues and students talking about the human brain and neurobiology, I decided to do some reading myself. To my amazement and amusement, I discovered that the contemporary brain science confirms the phenomenology of qualia (subjective experience). The psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist in his book, *The Master and His Emissary*, tells us that experiencing the world with the right brain has the abovementioned characteristics of qualia. In contrast, the left brain experiences the world in terms that lends itself to quantification and abstract measurement. McGilchrist's contention is that the rise of

modernity and its worldview prioritized the left-brain ways of perceiving and interacting with the world, while marginalizing the right brain. The result is a creation of a civilization that is hell-bent on quantifying, controlling, manipulating, and conquering the world in the quest for mastery and domination. The current outcome-driven, evidence-based, data-centric, and measure-maniac culture that affects so many aspects of human life is, simply put, the manifestation of an imbalance dangerously skewed towards the left-brain functions in the ecology of mind.

David: Indeed, everywhere we witness deep suffering induced by this imbalance: idolization of material wealth, viral contagion of the American Dream over the entire planet, deepening delusions of material progress through the conquest of Nature. Thirst for material gratification produces no lasting satisfaction. Nothing is sacred as everything is violable, exploitable, sellable, and disposable. The current unprecedented rate of ecocide that threatens to completely undo the delicate fabric of life on this planet is, I would argue, the logical outcome of this sickness that results from the loss of the sacred.

Heesoon: So what can we do, collectively and individually, to help restore greater balance between the qualitative and the quantitative?

Avraham: As a psychotherapist and a teacher of counselling students, my work has been focused on the inner and interactional or intersubjective dimensions of human activity. We learn to be human beings in the matrix of intersubjective interactions in infancy and early childhood, and it is within this matrix that, I believe, we can learn to practice the immeasurable most fruitfully. Over the course of my training as a psychotherapist, I have been fortunate to learn the art of facilitation with respect to working with the subjective/intersubjective matrix, and I bring this art into my teaching. For example, I practice in my class deep democracy (Mindell, 1995, 2002) that always prioritizes time to discuss feelings and different perspectives.

Heesoon: I like what I am hearing about prioritizing voicing and discussing feelings and perspectives in a formal institutional environment. This is not

the usual, as we all know. Avraham, I wonder if you could share with us the details of what you do with your students in your institution.

Avraham: Certainly! The cohorts I teach typically consist of 20 students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. It is a microcosm of the world. I work with the personal, interpersonal, philosophical, theoretical, and practice dimensions in the task of integrating their personal growth with their scholarship as graduate students, and their development as professionals.

In my teaching, I start with setting up a pedagogic structure that serves as a container in which students' (and my) immeasurable human dimensions are explored, interchanged, and deeply experienced. Over the course of the first year of the program, students increasingly investigate their own inner and intersubjective worlds within the context of their cohort, integrating and coordinating their learning in all dimensions. Gradually, what I have held at the outset is naturally taken over by the students, individually and collectively.

Each class begins with five minutes of personal reflection/meditation followed by a few minutes to write any reflections they want to record. Next, there is a community-building phase. Students have the opportunity to 'check in' and share with the group whatever they wish, including their experience during meditation. This is highly variable in terms of content and over time has an enormous effect on students being known, knowing each other, learning the effect of their particular presence on the group. Invariably, students have every year referred to this as "circle time," a term that, interestingly, I have never introduced. Following this check for about 30-40 minutes, the class continues with discussion of readings, demonstration by the educator of practice, opportunities for practice with each other, and discussion within the group about all aspects of the curriculum material. While all that I describe here takes place in classroom, I think variations on the same kind of "pedagogic container" building that includes "circle time" can take place in other institutional settings or wherever humans come together to work together.

I turn to you now, Heesoon. I know that you have been an activist, even if you may not want to or like to attach that term to yourself, in wrestling with the culture of measurability.

Heesoon: Thank you for honoring me with the title, ‘activist’! I would have been shy to accept that title in the past, but today, I embrace it wholeheartedly as I believe that activism takes many forms, including “subtle activism” (Nicol, 2012). Over the past two decades, I have been building pockets of a counter-culture of immeasurability theorists and practitioners around me through teaching educational philosophy. I have supervised a couple dozen doctoral and magistral students whose theses addressed the immeasurable (and ineffable) worldviews. And most recently, my colleagues and I set up a Master of Education (MEd) program on the theme of contemplative inquiry and approaches. While traditional academic discursivity is not neglected at all in this program, the development of the immeasurable qualities of our being is given a primary focus and emphasis in this program.

I believe in the power of small-scale counter-culture activism rhizomatically propagated across communities, whether professional or personal, intellectual or practical. Sharing and tasting together and being nourished by the rich and liberating fruits of the immeasurable culture are the real motivating power behind such pocket activism.

David: Avi’s discussion of deep democracy reminds me of my work as a teacher educator, when I provided teacher candidates with descriptive feedback only and partnered with them in the ongoing reflection of their practice. It’s an ongoing conversation. There are no measurements, no percentage points, ranking, or even performance descriptors such as “excellent,” or “satisfactory,” which imply superiority and inferiority. At first, having been acculturated to quantitative rankings, students struggled to make sense of purely qualitative feedback. But the process of reflection, which is a practice of disciplined engagement with complexity, leads to insights that inform development. We practice discernment rather than measurement. Dialogue

with a partner in reflection creates a space of mutual discipline – we support each other while sharpening each other’s viewpoints. We handle complexity by engaging in complexity, not by boiling it down to numbers; and in the process, we become more attuned, aware, pragmatic and sensitive to complexity. What will happen if organizations structure leadership in pairs or teams, building in time for reflective dialogue and conversation? What if there is no point of “decision making” per se, and choices are embedded in the ongoing reflective conversations that are embedded in the life of the organization?

Heesoon: Those are challenging questions and it has been a fascinating dialogue with you both. As a close, I would like to invite you to make poetic offerings or gestures.

David: I very much appreciate this exchange. I conclude by offering the following verse from the *Tao Te Ching*:

Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub;
It is on the hole in the center that the use of the cart hinges.
We make a vessel from a lump of clay;
It is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful.
We make doors and windows for a room;
But it is these empty spaces that make the room livable.
Thus, while the tangible has advantages,
It is the intangible that makes it useful.

Avraham: I offer a quote from the founder of Aikido, the only martial art based on love:

True victory is not defeating an enemy. True victory gives love and changes the enemy’s heart.

Surely, if as O-Sensei said, we might achieve victory by giving love to transform an enemy’s heart; it makes eminent good sense to apply this transformational idea to classroom and organizational leadership practice.

Heesoon: One of my favorite quotes is a passage from Dogen's Instructions to the Chief Cook:

Take up a green vegetable leaf and turn it into a sixteen-foot golden body; take the sixteen-foot golden body and turn it into a green leaf. This is the miraculous transformation—a work of Buddha that benefits all sentient beings.

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