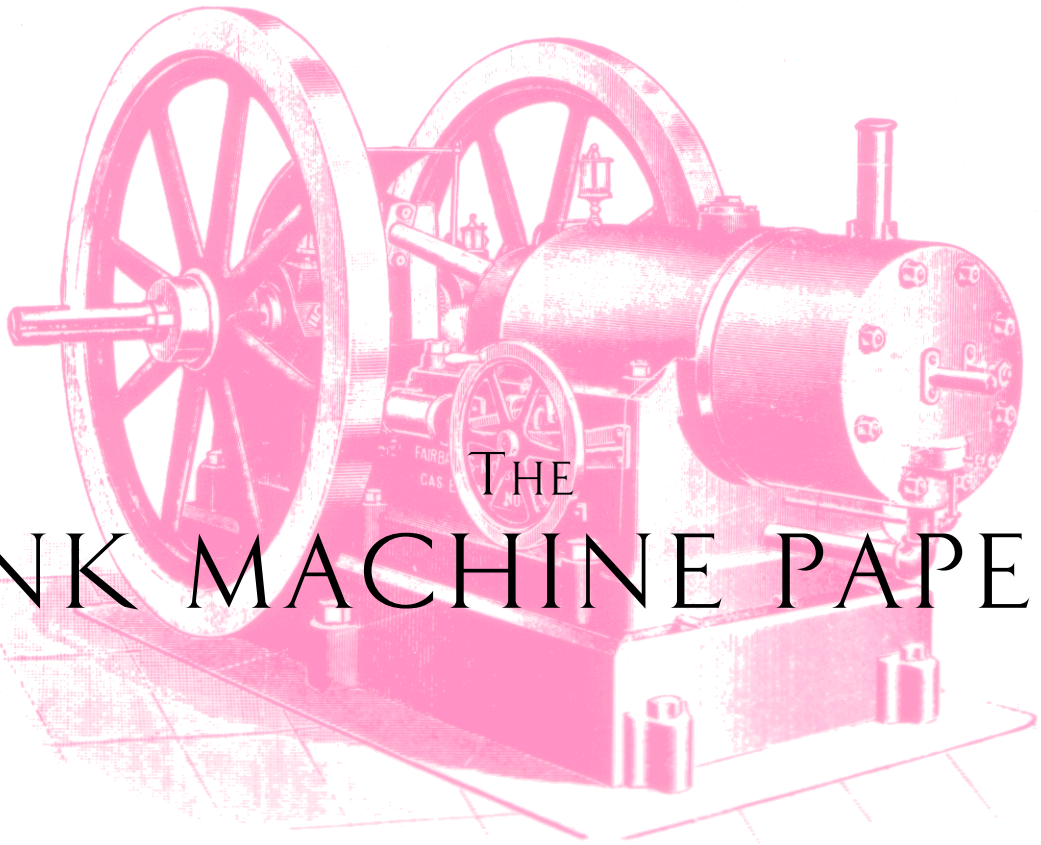

The Pink Machine Papers

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On Letting Go

I.

Teaching management at a school focused on technology and engineering (the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm) is in many ways an enlightening experience. It also affords one the possibility to reflect on some issues that seem to dominate in both these fields – technology and management as academic disciplines with an assumedly pragmatic base. More specifically, I'm here talking about the notion of "solving problems". The scare-quotes are here not meant to specify there being something fundamentally deep or complex to the issue, just that this innocuous phrase obviously means a lot to some people. We are taught that engineering is the science of problem-solving with technology, whereas management is often thought of as the art of solving business-related problems. Attached to this is the belief that the world is filled with problems, and that the business of the sciences – particularly the pragmatic ones – is solving them. Preferably, the sciences should solve them all, even though we accept that new ones will constantly pop up. This, in short, seems to be the justification for business schools and institutes of technology: There are problems, and we need to learn how to solve them.

It is quite natural and obvious that there are both small, mundane problems and big, serious ones. The problem-solving we try to teach in universities almost by logical necessity fall in the latter category. But still these problems cannot be any old problems. Much of the power of titles such as those bestowed by institutes of technology derives from the way in which these seem to signify a special knowledge of solutions, as well as the capacity to solve *particular* knots and tangles. In many ways, a problem is only as good as its solution, and the solutions developed in institutions of higher learning are designed to be multidimensional, complex and, perhaps most important of all, legitimate in a specific cultural context – specifically that of the profession and the legitimacy connected to this. A solution that can be used by just any old Joe belittles both the problem *and* the solution. So much is made of how institutes of higher learning teach students to attack problems from many angles, and to see problems as inherently embedded and enmeshed in a network of political, economical, social and technological networks. In fact, much of what is done in universities today deals not so much with solving problems, but comprehending these as much more difficult than they appear on surface. As the old adage goes, to a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail, so a university education is often seen as equipping people with more than a hammer. Sometimes this means equipping them with a large but predefined set of tools, so that they will not see everything as a nail, but still always perceive of the world as manageable with their toolset. They may see problems as nails, bolt, screws and pieces of metal requiring filing down, but rarely as a social construction or a symbolic dragon. Other schools have a different approach, often called something along the lines of "reflective" or "critical". This entails giving the students both a bewildering array of tools and presenting them with proof that those tools will not always work. Consequently one hopes to create people who will, when faced with a problem, not have a fixed preconceived notion thereof, but instead treat it as a local and in some ways novel phenomena. This less-than-normative way pleases many, on both aesthetic and intellectual grounds.

I have been trained within this latter camp, so my teaching has usually focused on the problem with viewing problems as solvable by universally applicable models. Instead, when teaching I have usually pointed to how each practical problem, as opposed to the abstractions we create in lectures, will require unique and localized solutions. And this, to me, was sufficient. However, as of late some threads that I now realize have long been present in those jumbled flashes of neural activity of mine, have started to confuse the issue. In part, some of the most fundamental beliefs regarding problems and their solutions have started nagging me, and it is this that has prompted me to write on a particular mode of problem-solving, namely "letting go".

II.

Ponder that you are faced with a problem. Pretend, for instance, that you are the chief executive of a corporation, and that you are faced with a competitors aggressive tactics in your shared marketspace. What do you do? For somebody with an "educashon", the answer is obvious. Use this tool, and that, and collect more information, and get a more complete picture of the problem, and attempt thisandthat. Simply put, they will tell you how they think you should solve your problem. Some of them will offer up a "sure thing". They will tell you, often with a fair amount of fervor, that some imaginatively named solution – reengineering, imaginization, branding, balanced scorecard – will fix it all, regardless of its generic makeup. Others will recommend a wide array of analyses, followed by a lot of strategizing, followed by a complex plan for dealing with the problem. Often just looking at which school these people have been educated in will make it possible to guess which tactic they will endorse. Talk to a humanist or a philosopher with an interest in management issues, and you will most likely get a special version of this latter tactic. While accepting the need for analysis and strategy, they will also use words such as "wisdom" and "philosophy" to point out that any solution will only be tentative and partial, and that despite the existence of models and theories, human reason is still where it's all at. In other words, philosophers tend to prescribe philosophy as a solution to problems. Humanists will proffer "reflection" or "critique" as a similar universal solution. In fact, get enough academics in a room, present a problem, and you will have at least as many solutions as you have academics – and often many, many more.

However, ponder you present the same problem to a less educated soul, such as a child or a working man (or woman). Although many of these will quite certainly tell you their solution to the problem, and to do so with far less verbiage and in a significantly faster manner than the academics, some of them might in fact ask whether you should do anything at all. "–Why?", they might ask, "–You'd be better off just ignoring it."

III.

Interestingly enough, some philosophers, with the magisterial Ludwig Wittgenstein as what may well be the finest example, have objected to the claim that philosophy solves anything at all, besides the problems created by philosophy itself. Much of what looked like problems was to Wittgenstein merely confusion, and he emphasized that he didn't offer solutions, only "therapy". In fact, much of his thinking dealt with not getting into the problem-solving associated with philosophy, but instead with identifying what can be said and what one shouldn't bother with. Something similar can be found in the works of American pragmatism, such as when William James wanted to find out what claims could actually matter, and which represented mere empty metaphysics. What is at play here is a truly radical notion, one that breaks with a lot of what is taken for granted in Western thought (and which, in a way, lies at the heart of Zen and Taoist Buddhism), namely that some problems need not be solved.

There seems to be a contradiction here, but only if one gets too entangled into notions of causality and necessary connections. Often we seem to think that the defining characteristic of a problem is that it represents something to be solved, in the same way a state in the world (such as war or hydrochloric acid) represents the result of certain previous states and reactions. But this is not the only way to view problems. Take the simple arithmetic of 2+3=5. We can say that 2+3=x (with x as the common form of representing a question in arithmetic) is a problem, or that 2+x=5 is a problem, and so forth. 5 (five) is not a problem, however. We can construct a problem out of it, and our brains often seem hardwired to do so (mathematically inclined persons often turn perfectly mundane observations, such as the numbers "12, 36, 60" on a billboard, into mini-problems), but it is on some level just a simple thing in the world, one of the infinity of things of which Wittgenstein stated "The world is everything that is the case." Problems both are and aren't all around us.

Of course, in philosophy this has meant dividing problems into "real" and "false" ones. For William James, metaphysical problems were often non-problems, since they didn't "do" anything in the world. For Wittgenstein, many of the issues in philosophy merely looked like problems, and could be dealt with simply by showing them as jumbled thinking. So in a way, these thinkers didn't as much criticize the solving of problems as they radically decreased the number of issues that should be perceived as problems. What unites James and Wittgenstein is that they both realized that there were issues that weren't really fruitful to think to hard about, particularly not if one thought to "solve" them. Among these was the problem of defining what a word means. In a move that predates deconstruction and post-structuralism Wittgenstein deftly showed how the search for the true meaning of a word – the problem of what a word "really stands for" – was doomed to failure due to the ever-changing and tentative nature of language. By exhorting people to examine the use rather than the meaning of a word, he in a sense dissolved the problem of a words meaning – there was no problem to begin with. This did not mean that thinking should cease, quite the contrary, but the search for a fixed and eternal "solution" to the problem of what a word means was here shown as futile and pointless.

Still, this does not mean that Wittgenstein felt that there were problems that needn't be solved. In a way, he posits a meta-problem: How can we sort out the real problems from the pseudo-problems? But there is another possible interpretation, one that comes closer to his

ethic and religious sensibilities, that could be made. By showing how a number of things that we perceive of as problems are best left aside, ignored, Wittgenstein (and James) may in fact be showing something far more fundamental. Sometimes problems need not be solved. Sometimes there is much wisdom (that strange and confusing word) in not thinking unnecessarily hard about things. Sometimes it is best just to let go.

IV.

What I mean by "letting go" is the following: The art of management (understood in the broadest sense and encompassing all activities in which intentional organization is enacted) is not merely a question of problem-solving, but also deals with how to ignore or bypass problems in the world. It is a logical surety that one can always posit more problems than one can practically deal with at a time. Walking to work means, on a specific level, ignoring a number of problems. These include metaphysical problems (What is "this" "I" that "walks" to "work"?), political problems (Ignoring the number of political organizations and issues one meets while walking through town.), social problems (people living on the street, poverty, troubled children and people with "problems in living") and practical problems (How am I to pay this months rent?). Were we to try to solve all problems we are confronted with, we would become paralyzed. So we have developed finely attuned mechanisms for ignoring issues and bypassing problems. This much should be obvious. What my imagined critic would say is that this proves nothing at all, since I've only highlighted that problem-solving takes place in a dispersed fashion, so that certain people solve certain problems at certain times. And she would be quite right.

The observation that we do not solve all problems we are confronted with immediately and in parallel proves only that we are capable of compartmentalization. The observation that we ignore some problems completely arguably shows that we extend this to certain problems assumedly being solved by other individuals and/or agencies. Poverty in the streets may be a good example of this. A lay sociologist would probably call this the "Not my problem"-syndrome. Even though we see the problem, we do not try to solve it, for we believe that there is some other acting body that tries to do so. We may even express our disgust at the inability of this other agent to solve the problem, and moralize about this: "If I had the possibility, I would..." Some of the non-solving of problems can thus be accounted for by referring to extension, removal, and dispersal.

Taking this into account, there still remains a number of problems you are confronted with on a daily basis and which you ignore or pass by. Often this is done on a unconscious level, resulting in your being unaware of the existence of said problem – the sidestepped puddle, the letter laid aside, the argument not gotten into. Such acts, which we often ignore as being acts due to their minimalist nature, are in fact a continuous accompanying theme to the more visible act of solving problems. We continuously let things go, but we seldom think about what this means.

V.

For somebody in the business of solving problems, and I include both CEOs and management scholars in places of higher learning into this category, this presents either a conundrum or a possibility. From the viewpoint of management, letting certain things be is a necessity. As studies of managerial practice have shown, much of the work of e.g. a CEO consists of delegating and selecting what parts of the chaotic whole one focuses on. A manager might in this perspective be someone whose main work lies in ignoring stuff – i.e. letting go, letting be. However, this is almost always seen as a highly active occupation. The manager doesn't ignore, she chooses. She doesn't turn a blind eye, she focuses on the most important issues. Obviously, this is only part of the story. Among the many capacities of a manager we can obviously find a kind of courage, namely the capability of not being unduly bothered by not having paid attention to everything that might be important. When choosing how to act, we also choose how to ignore, how to crop things out of our perspective, and to do this in a conscious way takes courage and a certain maturity. And this kind of poise may even be a constitutive part of leadership.

What I suggest, then, is neither necessarily original nor even particularly new, but still disregarded often enough to warrant its rephrasing: A theory of decision-making must, as an integral part, contain a theory of how to ignore problems, i.e. on letting go. Such a theory of non-action, or one of intentional myopia, would obviously go against the notion of decision-makers as omnipotent thinkers who can solve any problem, but it would be very close to the actual practice of decision-making, where demarcation and partial disregarding of things plays an important part. The question arises why theorizing this willful non-action is so difficult. Whereas theorizing action has its own problems, developing thinking about not acting seems to go against the very notion of theory.

At the same time, there is obviously a lot to be said both for and about letting go. A conceptualization of disregarding things would require for us to accept the negation of many things we cherish: progress, action, advance. It would also allow for us to have a more multifaceted theory of decision-making, for rather than chasing that elusive event of the "decision" we could observe the ebb and flow of "decisionality", the dialectic of deciding and ignoring, of intention and allowing for not intending. The theory of letting go would also be a letting go of the idea that decision-making is, in all its aspects, an activity - as it obviously to some extent is a non-such.

But what would such a theory look like? I will offer some starting points, but it is clear that developing thinking about letting go is a process that will require a lot of work. With this in mind, I have some ideas about how to start an inquiry into letting go of problems, or to make a slightly silly self-reference what makes Rehn's Principle of Problem-Solving – "Ignore a problem for long enough, and it ceases to be a problem." – work.

[1] Inaction must be understood as a more complex notion than merely a function of action, i.e. letting go is neither a non-action (the negation of an action) nor the action of not acting (it has to be allowed a nature of its own). Instead, it has its own nature.

[2] Letting go is not the same as cowardice or ineffectuality. Instead, letting go

requires maturity and a certain engagement with both the self and the world. In order to leave a problem, you have to in some way have the capacity to engage with it. It requires more than mere myopia.

[3] Letting go is, in some way, a theory of potential. It shows us the many avenues our life could take us, the tangled webs of the world, the endless possibilities. And also the limits of our potential, the fact that we can never do everything we could do. In a world of potentials, letting go unmasks our capacity for it.

[4] Letting go is an ethics. It involves being in the world and accepting ones limits, laying certain things to rest, to walk on when one could stop. It can develop into a negative ethics – not caring – or a positive one, but it will always relate to our being in the world.

[5] Letting go is related to wisdom.

VI.

For Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosophy should strive for thought at rest, thought that weary from travel could sit down and take it easy. Herein also lies the link between Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger. The notion of resting thought is clearly closely related to the notion of letting go. Both are related to a notion of serenity, the calm joy of freeing either something or oneself, the moment of Zen-like peace. When we free ourselves from the forced notion of there always being a problem "at hand", we really do free ourselves.

What theories, such as those taught in business schools and institutes of technology, teach us about problems is rarely related to this form of problem-solving, the disavowal of there being a problem. This is dangerous for two reasons. One, it teaches a *modus operandi* that goes against what we always already know and practice as human beings. Two, it propagates a theory of decision-making that is fundamentally flawed.

A theory of decision-making or problem-solving that cannot include the notion of an alterity, this pure actuality of conscious inaction, is not complete. Letting go is an existing, and very much a used alternative to the notion of "action" or "decision". It may not be the most easily captured notion, but this should not keep us from trying to engage with it. It may require us to leave behind certain things we've grown accustomed to in our thinking, but so be it. Sometimes thinking too requires letting go.

Pink Machine is the name of a research project currently carried out at the Department of Industrial Economics and Management at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. It aims to study the often forgotten non-serious driving forces of technical and economical development. We live indeed in the reality of the artificial, one in which technology has created, constructed and reshaped almost everything that surrounds us. If we look around us in the modern world, we see that it consists of things, of artefacts. Even the immaterial is formed and created by technology - driven by the imperative of the economic rationale.

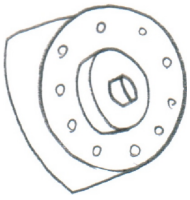
As Lev Vygotsky and Susanne Langer have pointed out, all things around us, all these technological wonders, have their first origin in someone's fantasies, dreams, hallucinations and visions. These things, which through their demand govern local and global economical processes, have little to do with what we usually regard as "basic human needs". It is rather so, it could be argued, that the economy at large is governed by human's unbounded thirst for jewellery, toys and entertainment. For some reason - the inherent urge of science for being taken seriously, maybe - these aspects have been recognised only in a very limited way within technological and economical research.

The seriousness of science is grey, Goethe said, whereas the colour of life glows green. We want to bring forward yet another colour, that of frivolity, and it is pink.

The Pink Machine Papers is our attempt to widen the perspective a bit, to give science a streak of pink. We would like to create a forum for half-finished scientific reports, of philosophical guesses and drafts. We want thus to conduct a dialogue which is based on current research and which gives us the opportunity to present our scientific ideas before we develop them into concluding and rigid - grey - reports and theses.

Finally: the name "Pink Machine" comes from an interview carried out in connection with heavy industrial constructions, where the buyer of a diesel power plant worth several hundred million dollars confessed that he would have preferred his machines to be pink.

Claes Gustafsson



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