



# An Ancient Greek Philosophy of Management Consulting: An Interview with David Shaw

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## Abstract

This article is a transcript of an interview with David Shaw, the author of the book, “An Ancient Greek Philosophy of Management Consulting: Thinking Differently about its Assumptions, Principles and Practice”, published with Springer in 2022. It discusses his reasons for looking to the ancient Greek philosophers for new ideas about management consulting, and how his papers for this journal have contributed to the development of the book.

**Keywords** Management consulting · Ancient Greek philosophy · David Shaw

David Shaw is a former management consultant and university teacher, and a former colleague of mine at the University of Greenwich, who has published several articles in this journal based on the work of the ancient Greek philosophers. He has now written a book entitled “An Ancient Greek Philosophy of Management Consulting”, just published with Springer (Shaw 2022). I had a discussion with him in November 2021 about his motivation for using ancient Greek philosophy as the basis for his discussion of management consulting, and how his articles for this journal contributed several of the “building blocks” for the book. Here is the discussion that we had.

*Wim: You were a practising management consultant for most of your career. What made you start thinking about it as a subject for philosophical study as well as a practice? Was your experience as a practitioner helpful to you in thinking through the philosophical issues?*

David: When you join a management consultancy firm you are inducted into a whole array of management consultancy approaches and methods. In the course of this you absorb a lot of assumptions and principles about how the job should be done, which ought to raise all sorts of philosophical questions in your mind, but amid the pressures of getting on with the job all too often you don't give much thought to those questions. Let me give you an example. Most of us are familiar with the “unfreeze-change-refreeze” model

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of organisational change, and that model underlies most management consultancy methods for managing organisational change. But if you think about it for a moment, that model makes a whole collection of debatable assumptions. It seems to suggest that an organisation is some kind of “thing” that can be changed into a different kind of “thing” through various management procedures. It seems to suggest that organisational change is a linear, step-by-step process. It seems to suggest that what is important about change is the kind of “thing” that you are changing an organisation into, and that the process of change is important only to the extent that it leads to the kind of “thing” that you want to create. These assumptions are not entirely unreasonable, but there are plenty of other assumptions that are equally reasonable. Should we really think of an organisation as a “thing” at all? And is organisational change a linear, step-by-step process? I think that for the majority of my own management consultancy career I didn’t think very seriously about the philosophical questions raised by my work. It was when I started to teach courses in management consulting, and I had to explain some of its fundamentals to my students, that I really began to think about these questions. And it was then that I started to appreciate that the work of the ancient Greek philosophers, which I had studied at school and university but not thought much about since, was very relevant to these questions. In fact, the first paper that I submitted to this journal, “On Misunderstanding Heraclitus: The Justice of Organisation Structure”, used the ideas of Heraclitus to explore different ways of thinking about the nature of organisations and organisational change.

Turning to the second part of your question, professional scholars who themselves have no practical experience of management consulting have produced a lot of literature about it. But management consulting is of course a practical business, and it is helpful also to be able to look at the issues “from the inside”, having actually experienced the day-to-day pressures of selling consultancy projects, meeting the quality, cost and timescale targets for your projects, and meeting your targets for utilising your time on activities for which clients can be billed. I remember when you interviewed Paul Griseri earlier this year, he said that philosophers sometimes talk about business without always knowing much about it, and purely academic writing about management consulting can seem very theoretical and a bit naïve. So I think my own experience has helped me to make an “insider’s” contribution. Having said that though, we really do need professional scholars who can write about management consulting in an independent-minded and dispassionate way, without having absorbed the typical ways of thinking of management consultants. Professional scholars have been really important in giving a critical perspective on the industry. A lot of the literature that has been written by management consultants themselves makes management consultants seem all-knowing and infallible. When you have worked in the industry for a long time, it is easy to start believing too much in your own rhetoric.

*Wim: How did you ‘meet’ the ancient Greek philosophers?*

David: Well, I studied classics at school and university for around ten years in total, which gave me a good knowledge of the language and history of ancient Greece, and I read a substantial amount of the work of Plato and Aristotle as well as fragments of the Presocratic philosophers during that time. But having left university I never made much of a connection during my business career between what I had learned about ancient Greek philosophy and my work as a management consultant. Of course, I now rather regret that.

*Wim: What is it about management consultancy that makes you think that it is of particular interest from a philosophical point of view?*

David: A couple of opposing perspectives on management consulting stand out for me as being especially interesting from a philosophical point of view. One is that management consultants are members of a knowledge-intensive profession who use their “brainware” to help clients improve their performance and create shareholder value. Another is that management consultants cynically exploit their clients for their own advantage by “borrowing their watches and telling them the time”. The first of these perspectives raises epistemological questions, while the second raises ethical questions.

Clearly management consultants must have some kind of specialised knowledge if they are going to help their clients. But there are some big questions about the kind of knowledge that they need in order to be helpful to their clients, and about the kind of knowledge that it is even possible for management consultants to have. Going back to the “unfreeze-change-refreeze” model of organisational change, there is a clear implication in a lot of management consultants’ rhetoric that they have specialised, management science knowledge that enables them reliably and predictably to transform their clients’ organisations into the kinds of “things” that their clients want. In other words, the management consultants’ knowledge enables their clients to be certain that the results that they have been promised will be delivered. But what if organisational change isn’t like that? What if it is complex, unpredictable, and full of surprising twists and turns? If that is the case, the kind of knowledge that management consultants have cannot be “scientific” in the sense that we would usually understand the term. The knowledge that they need must instead be of a kind that enables them to be skilful in improvising and responding to the unexpected. The work of Plato and Aristotle is really useful in both evaluating the knowledge claims that management consultants make, and in identifying the kind of knowledge that they really need to do their work.

Management consultancy firms, just like many business organisations, have their ethical codes that they promote to their employees and their clients. These are often criticised for being vague, inadequately supported by senior management commitment, and not very effective. Individual management consultants are given specific financial performance targets that determine their pay and career progression, and indeed their prospects for continued employment with their firms. In these circumstances, it is not surprising if they give more attention to achieving their financial targets than to complying with their ethical code, especially if the two are in conflict. It is difficult to deal with this problem, but ethical policies that have been thought out rigorously and are persuasive to the people who are expected to implement them is a good starting point. There has been a revival of interest in Aristotle’s virtue ethics as a foundation for professional and business ethics, and I think these ideas have a lot to offer too in the world of management consulting.

Of course, the question that I raised to begin with, about the nature of organisations, is an ontological question. The way in which management consultants go about their business depends a lot on what they see as the reality of their clients’ organisations. If they think of them as “things”, as they usually seem to do, they will approach their work in one way. If they think of them as collections of continually changing processes, as Heraclitus’s ideas might suggest, they will approach it in a different way. Of course, organisations are social constructions, so how we understand the reality of them is a choice to adopt one metaphor (or group of metaphors) rather than another (or others). But ultimately, even Heraclitus and his successors and critics, who believed that they were making discoveries about the nature of the universe, were in essence identifying metaphors for thinking about its reality.

In summary, ontological, epistemological and ethical ideas form the philosophical foundations of management consultancy practice. In my view, these philosophical

foundations have to be sound if management consultants are going to make the best contribution to their clients and to society.

*Wim: OK, so your experience brought you to pose and answer philosophical questions, so that is from business to philosophy. Is there also a way back? Do you think there is anything that management consultants can learn from philosophy that can help them make practical improvements in the way in which they go about their business?*

David: Thinking clearly is a practical skill that is important in commercial business, including management consulting, and good philosophy helps people to think clearly. Let me give you an example of where I think management consultants and their clients often do not think very clearly. Management consultants normally use project management methods to plan and help them implement projects for their clients, and project-based thinking underlies most management consultancy methods. Just as I was saying about the “unfreeze-change-refreeze” model of organisational change management, traditional project management methods are based on rational, linear, step-by-step processes for achieving specified objectives. Of course, management consultants have to be able to tell their clients what they are going to do for them and how much they will charge for doing it, and they have to produce some kind of project plan in order to be able to estimate the timescales and costs of their work. Yet we all know that, in reality, when you set out to implement a major change in an organisation you cannot possibly predict with any confidence exactly what is going to happen. There is a phrase that I remember from an article by Andrew Pettigrew, who kindly contributed the Foreword to my book, when he said that however carefully you frame your strategy for bringing about a major organisational change you will always have to “transform the strategy through use”. The processes of organisational change are inherently unpredictable, so a management consultancy effort to implement a major organisational change will inevitably have to be adapted and changed as you go along. Unfortunately, management consultants typically try to assure their clients that they are so expert in what they do that they can make reliable predictions as to the effects that their planned project activities will have. Of course, they cannot predict exactly what is going to happen, so in practice the managers of these projects improvise, and adapt their project plans to events as they unfold. But because the idea is so entrenched that project plans should be reliable, and that the need to improvise and adapt them is evidence of project management failure, they cannot declare to their clients or their own managers that what they have done is to “transform their strategy through use”. So they try to obfuscate the extent to which the project that they have delivered has diverged from the project plan with which they set out.

When it comes to helping clients to manage strategic organisational change, which is a major part of their business, management consultants have no scientific knowledge to guide them, because organisations are not the contained, predictable “things” that their rhetoric, and the logic of their methods, so often presumes them to be. Project management methods certainly are essential in carrying through management consultancy projects to help clients implement major organisational change, but these methods have to be combined with advanced management consultancy capabilities in improvising and responding to unexpected developments in the processes of change. Clear thinking about the ontological issues – what is the reality of an organisation? – could guide management consultants to a more realistic way of approaching strategic organisational change. And clear thinking about the epistemological issues – what kind of knowledge do management consultants need, and what kind of knowledge is it possible for them to possess? – could help

management consultancy firms recognise the kind of experience-based, intuitive insight that consultants need to succeed in this kind of work.

*Wim: What about the clients of management consultants? Is there anything of practical value that they can gain from a philosophical perspective on management consulting?*

David: Of course, clients will be better clients if they too have a clear appreciation of what an organisation is, and of the kind of knowledge that the management consultants they hire ought to have. But there is a particular problem about management consulting that I would like to mention. That is that it is very difficult to say exactly what is, and what is not, management consulting. You don't need any special qualifications or membership of a particular professional body to be a management consultant. The only qualification you need to begin trading as a management consultant is to say that you are one, and people who call themselves management consultants provide an enormous range of very different kinds of services. A critical distinction is between management consultants whose services consist mainly or wholly of implementing IT systems, and those whose services consist mainly of giving management advice. These are very different kinds of services, and the clients who use them need very different kinds of skills to contract with management consultants and manage their relationships with them.

My own view, and many people would disagree with it, is that it is giving management advice that makes you a management consultant, and that implementing IT systems – even though it is an essential service - in itself does not amount to management consulting. If you think of management consulting as being particularly about giving management advice, I think clients can learn a lot from reflecting on what Aristotle had to say about consultation. He said that consultation takes place when you have an important decision to make, and you think that you are unable to decide what to do on your own but need to include others in your decision-making. Of course, Aristotle had no experience of management consultancy, but clients could do worse than think about the implications of what he said for their use of management consultants. When you have an important and difficult decision to make, you want the advice of people with practical experience of dealing with the kind of problem that you yourself are dealing with. You need to be willing to treat those people as more or less equal partners in your decision-making, respecting their advice but ultimately taking responsibility for the final decision yourself. If you cannot see yourself having that kind of relationship with the management consultants who offer their services to you, either they are the wrong consultants or your situation doesn't actually warrant the use of management consultants.

*Wim: After retiring from your management consultancy career, you trained as a university teacher and taught courses on management consulting among other management topics, first at the University of Greenwich and later at Queen Mary University of London. Did this experience affect the way you think about management consulting, or help you in developing your ideas for the book?*

David: If it had not been for my experience of teaching university students about management consulting, I would probably never have written the book. You have to frame your ideas really clearly and simply if you are going to teach. It was going through this discipline, and responding to the questions that students asked, that made me take a careful look at some of

the assumptions that I had always made myself about management consultancy practice, and begin to be interested in writing about the philosophy of management consulting.

Another important aspect of university teaching is the opportunity that it gives you to discuss your work with other scholars. I was particularly fortunate that around the time when I started working at the University of Greenwich a new Professor of Leadership and Organisation, David Gray, joined the university, and I taught a course jointly with him. I had many discussions with David about my research. He encouraged me in my work, and pointed out what was wrong with it with great charm and patience. Sadly, he died unexpectedly and far too young, but the opportunity that I had during my time at the University of Greenwich to discuss my ideas with David in particular was immensely valuable in sharpening my thinking and writing. In summary, my experience of both teaching students and discussing ideas with academic colleagues influenced my thinking and writing about management consulting a great deal.

*Wim: You have specifically chosen ancient Greek philosophy as the focus of your book. What led you to make that choice, and what do you see as the special contribution of ancient Greek philosophy in analysing the philosophical problems of management consulting?*

As I said earlier, management consulting raises a number of philosophical problems, specifically in respect of ontology, epistemology and ethics. The ancient Greek philosophers had great strengths in each of these areas. We should not forget Alfred North Whitehead's observation on the lines that western philosophy is a collection of footnotes to Plato. Perhaps more important than this observation in itself, however, is Whitehead's comment that the value of Plato's work stemmed in large measure from the distinct intellectual tradition – very different from our own – in which he was working. In order really to understand the work of the ancient Greek philosophers you have to develop an appreciation of the particular political, social and economic conditions to which they were responding, and the intellectual legacy that had come down to them from the early stages of Greek religion. Their thinking was not less than our own, but it was very different. It is this difference that makes their work a potentially valuable source of useful novelty in our thinking about management consulting. If you can enter into their ways of looking at the world you can look at contemporary problems with a different kind of vision, and perhaps discover different and better ways of looking at them. Let me give you just one example. Some while ago I submitted a paper to this journal entitled "Aristotle and the Management Consultants: Shooting for Ethical Practice". In writing the article I somewhat carelessly included a reference to one of Aristotle's definitions of justice, as a mean between taking too much and taking too little for yourself. One of the anonymous reviewers very reasonably commented that it was easy to see why it would be unjust for management consultants to charge their clients more for their work than it was worth, but why would it be unjust for them to charge less than it was worth? This is an example of how far our contemporary sense of morality includes Christian ideas, often adopted unconsciously, that might seem reasonable to us but unreasonable to people from a different tradition. Admiration of the extreme self-sacrifice of the martyrs is an important influence on Christian thought. But Aristotle believed that the essence of virtue was moderation, not pursuit of extremes. He believed that it was not possible to define what constituted ethical behaviour with any precision, but that it was the mean between opposite extremes that you had to aim at if you wanted to behave ethically. So for Aristotle, it was natural and right to enjoy all the good things of life that you could enjoy with good conscience, and you ought to do it. You would be veering towards an extreme, and "missing the mark" of justice, if you gave up

to others good things to which you were entitled and those others were not. This is just one example of where the ancient Greek philosophers were coming from a different place from us in our normal ways of thinking about things, but not necessarily a less reasonable one.

*Wim: Taking ancient Greek philosophy as basis for studying management consulting raises all sorts of difficulties, from the language in which it has been written to the differences between the ancient Greeks' political, economic, social and technological conditions of life and our own. How can people today overcome these barriers and gain insights from it that are relevant to a modern industry like management consulting?*

David: It certainly takes some effort really to understand the thought of the ancient Greek philosophers "from the inside". This is not, however, an impossible effort. I think the main challenge is really to recognise that it is an effort that has to be made if you are going to get value from their work. A good example is the misuse by management scholars, and management consultants, of the famous saying of Heraclitus that everything flows and nothing stays still. This quotation is used endlessly by people who want to argue that radical change is the order of the day in contemporary organisations, and that the work of organisational change management scholars and consultants is therefore of very great importance. It is true that Heraclitus wrote this, or something like it, but it is not true that you can infer from it that he thought the world was the chaotic place that these writers suggest. In fact, Heraclitus subscribed to the very ancient Greek belief that the universe was governed by divine Justice, by which he meant the order of the universe, which was regulated by forces that even controlled what the Olympian gods could do. This divine order meant, for example, that we could be confident that the sun would rise each morning and set each evening. In other words, the world was certainly full of continually changing processes, but these processes of change coexisted with powerful forces for continuity. Management scholars who see both continuity and change in contemporary organisations are much closer to Heraclitus's thought than those who claim that organisations are continually faced with radical, system-wide change. Turning to the later work of Plato and Aristotle, you have to recognise that their views on what was ethical behaviour were inseparable from their views on how people should behave towards each other in the city-state of Athens, and you simply cannot assume that the conditions in Athens to which they were responding are directly comparable with those in a modern nation state. For example, although Athens was a major state within the Greek world it was probably no more populous than the modern English city of Wolverhampton, and the ways in which it was governed and operated were greatly influenced by that particular characteristic, along with many others. Consequently, for example, writers on business ethics who assume that commercial life in Athens was directly comparable with commercial life in a modern nation state grossly misrepresent the conclusions that can be inferred from what Aristotle wrote about business. I do not think it is necessary to have vast, specialist knowledge of the ancient world in order to draw useful insights for the contemporary world from the work of the ancient Greek philosophers. There are plenty of accessible sources of information for those who are interested in the ancient Greek philosophers. The essential requirement is to be wary of making assumptions about their world that are based solely on experience of our own.

*Wim: Your book hasn't just come from nowhere. You have written a number of articles for "Philosophy of Management" that look at problems of the philosophy of management from the perspective of the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers. How far has your experience of preparing these articles for publication helped you in developing the book?*

David: I discussed several of the themes that I cover in the book in papers for this journal, and some of the anonymous reviewers of these papers made useful comments that influenced not only those papers but also some of the content of the book. I am very grateful for their contributions. I mentioned earlier, for example, a query that one of the reviewers raised about the paper on management consultancy ethics, which led to a useful expansion of the paper that highlighted an important example of how Aristotle's thinking differed from much contemporary thinking about ethics. There are many other examples. In one of the papers, I compared Plato's use of the "noble lie" in "The Republic" with the use of storytelling in corporate culture change programmes, and one of the anonymous reviewers drew attention to a body of literature on storytelling in modern business corporations that had been unfamiliar to me and significantly strengthened the line of argument in the paper. Of course, my first reaction on seeing the reviewers' criticisms of my work has often been to feel a bit irritated by them - perhaps some of your other authors occasionally react in the same way - but very often, when I have read them a second or a third time, I have realised that the anonymous reviewers had a point that I absolutely had to deal with. The book is certainly the better for the effort that I have made to publish work in this journal, and for the contributions to that work of this journal's anonymous reviewers.

*Wim: Thank you David for this book and for publishing your work in this journal. Good luck with the book.*

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author is editor-in-chief of this journal. The review process was handled by an executive editor.

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