

World Knowledge Forum 2013

Novel Thinking for the Executives

At the end of the second day of the 14th World Knowledge Forum Dr. Peter Baumann, Professor of Philosophy at Swarthmore College and Oliver Burkeman, a Feature Writer at The Guardian were led on a robust and wide-ranging discussion on what the moderator, Peter Kuhn described as “the big questions, the very big questions.” These questions included what is knowledge, the nature of happiness, and even, what is nothing?

“George weighs 300 pounds and has strong legs,” said Dr. Baumann, introducing one of the many bizarre examples he offered to illustrate common limitations in our thinking. “He is either a sumo wrestler or swimmer? Who would go with swimmer? The majority of people go with swimmer, but this neglects the base rate. There are so many more swimmers than sumo wrestlers.”

Dr. Baumann outlined the traditional conflicts we face when seeking to understand the fundamental nature of knowledge. He said that several of these conflicts can be dismissed more easily. These range from the fallibility of our senses to broader issues of uncertainty in knowing the future.

“Knowledge requires certainty,” Dr. Baumann said, paraphrasing a central issue in the study of knowledge. “We don’t need absolute certainty. That’s a crazy idea. Pretty sure is good enough. Someone once said requiring absolute certainty is like saying there are no doctors in Seoul because there is no person who could cure any conceivable disease within five minutes.”

Dr. Baumann turned to thinking more broadly, saying definitively that we are not rational. We make simple mistakes in our thinking all the time. He listed examples backed up by experiments showing that mistakes like gambler’s fallacy, misjudgments in probability, and social pressures blinding our judgment are common.

“People make all kinds of mistakes,” Dr. Baumann said. “It’s not a question of intelligence. If you ever make a mistake, don’t be depressed. It’s only natural.”

Mr. Burkeman agreed saying that the question of happiness is something that comes up frequently in the corporate context and people are always getting it wrong.

“People are bad at predicting what will make them happy.” Mr. Burkeman said.

The problem, according to Mr. Burkeman, is that there has been a mistake in our approach for the past century. That mistake boils down to two words: positive thinking. Although it sounds counter-intuitive, Mr. Burkeman said that the evidence shows that people should stop using positive thinking. Positive affirmations and visualization are promoted in many popular books, but studies show that they do not work.

“If you have a belief that positive thoughts will get the results that you want, then everyone involved in the

system is liable to voluntarily blind themselves to the perils until it is too late,” said Mr. Burkeman.

Instead of positive thinking, people need to accept a certain amount of uncertainty and embrace more negative realities. By facing the possibilities of failure we can be better prepared to face it when it comes. This idea is found in the philosophy of the Stoics as well as in Buddhism.

“We should turn toward those things we try so hard to avoid,” advised Mr. Burkeman. “When we bring back that negative side of things, when we learn to accommodate insecurity, uncertainty, sadness, the real messy, but fruitful business of creativity and progress is unleashed.”

Mr. Kuhn urged the audience to open their thinking to abstract concepts as a method to challenge themselves and open themselves to broader possibilities. To engage this part of our mental faculties, Mr. Kuhn launched into a dizzying summary of the mind body problem in philosophy and then the broader question of why there is something rather than nothing.

“There are practical benefits to this way of thinking,” he said.

This practicality was backed up by all of the panelists. Too much focus on goal-oriented thinking often blinds companies from finding solutions that spring from taking more creative approaches to problems. Plenty of evidence suggests that novel approaches work. Part of this success is because this approach broadens what is thought to be possible.

“There are lots of things we can easily imagine,” said Dr. Baumann. “The danger to think that what we can imagine is what is possible. You might think this won’t work. Think twice. Some people feel very confident that the status quo will be the status quo their entire life...Imagine a certain business model. If you are so used to it, you can’t easily imagine doing business in a different way.”

Mr. Burkeman warned that that this approach requires hard work.

“It’s easy to think you’ve exhausted all possibilities, but if you think that, you haven’t put in enough work.”