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The Case Method and the Development of Capacities for Action

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1. Personal Discovery and Lived Experience

It is generally accepted that the main purpose of teaching methods that put the learner in the position of having to tackle practical problems – such as the case method and many other forms of active learning[1] – is to: a) *discover general rules for action,* laws or concepts that are to be found in these specific situations; or else b) *provide* an example that will allow the learner to practise applying certain *general rules of procedure* in a real-life situation.

There is no doubt that both of these purposes can be achieved using the case method. Indeed, in the case method the student assimilates a rule, criterion or law of action and makes it her own, either through *discovery* or through *experience*. The case method allows the student to find out for herself what others already know, and to grasp as "real" what until then she knew only in theory. It allows her to get to know, with vividness and immediacy, and even with a special personal significance, the same things that can be learned by any other normal teaching method in terms of general rules, laws, principles or criteria for action. In other words, it is a different method of acquiring the same scientific or technical knowledge as may also be acquired, though in a different manner, by other more traditional procedures.

However, if the knowledge to be imparted does not need to be tailored to the individual, using the case method would be confusing, tedious and slow. A good book that sums up the conclusions of a debate that has been under way for two and a half thousand years of western culture will throw more light on the subject than hours of fruitless discussion.

[1] Psychodrama, business games, T groups, self-analysis exercises, etc.

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2. Science and Capacity for Action

And yet we all know that practical action cannot be based on scientific knowledge alone. We cannot rely only on general rules that hold true in all or most cases to guide or orient us in specific actions. Good management is not the result of scientific knowledge, even if that knowledge has been acquired by methods that give the learner first-hand experience. A mere knowledge of science does not make a person a good manager. In fact, it can even be a handicap, as the personal life of a good few scientists demonstrates. The crucial thing for a manager is not to *know*, but to *know how*; not to know better but to be better at doing things; in a word, not to be more knowledgeable but to be more capable[2]. Is this claim justified? In general terms, it clearly is: we all know people who are very knowledgeable but rarely achieve what they set out to do; who are very knowledgeable but just cannot see eye to eye with their boss; who are very knowledgeable but don't seem to be able to get on with their colleagues; who are very knowledgeable but cannot get anyone to do what they say... There are even those (and they are not so very rare) who never get anything done precisely because they know so much. Even so, we cannot be content merely to cite the highly dubious stereotype of the untaught entrepreneur who makes a fortune despite not being able to calculate percentages.

We need to analyze what we mean when we say that *our teaching is not intended to add to the student's knowledge but to develop her capacity for action.* Only then will we know whether the only outcome we can hope to obtain by applying the case method is the transmission of general laws, rules or concepts through personal experience; or whether, on the contrary, the case method can also be a tool for enhancing the student's capacity for action by exercising it in the context of an actual case.

What are the capacities for action we have been talking about? How can they be increased by means of the case method? That is the question.

3. Science and Prudence

Before we actually tackle the question head-on, we need to understand that, besides *scientific and technical knowledge* (which refers to reliable, fixed laws, things that *cannot be any other way*, things that, strictly speaking, are *necessary*), there is in man a different kind of knowledge: *prudential knowledge*. Prudential knowledge refers to things that change, in other words, things that *can be some other way*, things that tomorrow may not be the same as they are today (which we cannot say, for example, of the law of gravity): things which, strictly speaking, are *contingent*, and which we shall call random or variable.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to think of a single specific, practical action that could be decided and guided purely by scientific laws. Scientific laws tell us how to build roads, but they cannot tell us whether or not to build a road in the first place. While building a road demands a knowledge of cartography and materials, deciding whether or not to build a road demands prudence. It is not the engineers who decide whether or not to build a road; nor is the Trans-Siberian railway the result of a decision made by a railway engineer; nor was it NASA scientists who decided to put a rocket on the moon. These kinds of decisions, which are the product of knowledge for action, do not belong to science or technology. And that is why neither the scientist nor the engineer takes them, but, as we have said, prudence.

[2] Cfr. Bloom, Benjamin, *Taxonomía de los objetivos de la educación* (Part I, Chapter 2, "Los objetivos educacionales y el desarrollo del 'currículum'"). Ateneo, Buenos Aires, 1971.

If that is so, a question immediately forces itself upon us: why then, in school and university, are we taught the knowledge of science and not that of prudence? This is a very pertinent question, in that the young people who are educated in our schools and universities tend to make crucial prudential decisions – getting married, choosing a career or a speciality, making friendships, defining life projects – at the same time as they are being taught certain sciences – mathematics, geography, astronomy, physics and chemistry – which are definitely not strictly useful for making such decisions.

For my part, I venture to suggest the following explanation: *our education system focuses on teaching science not because it is more important, but because it is easier to teach*. Or conversely, if schools and universities do not try to teach prudential knowledge, it is because prudential knowledge is not easy to teach. In fact, unteachableness is in the very nature of prudential knowledge. Let me explain what I mean.

Prudence is the ability to make a right judgment about what I must do here and now. As Isidore of Seville would say, a prudent man is one who sees from afar, who is clear-sighted and accurately foresees events despite their uncertainty and changeability. Prudence is the reason that guides our particular present actions: reason insofar as it guides the actions of individuals. It therefore demands that we focus very strictly on circumstances here and now, which are constantly changing and different from future circumstances. How, then, can I possibly teach a person what she needs to know in order to do what is right in a random future situation, if that future situation will by definition be different from any present situation? This is the conundrum that prompts Aristotle to exclaim, in Book VI of his *Ethics*, that it is easy to teach a young man to be a geometer but impossible to teach him to be prudent. And what goes for sciences such as geometry goes equally for techniques such as cooking: every woman, he says, knows that tender meat is more digestible; the difficult thing is knowing whether the piece of meat you just bought in the market will be tender when it is cooked. And Aristotle is not the only one to have made this discovery; for we know that if we follow the instructions of a good practical chemistry book, we will be able to produce sulphuric acid; and yet we would not dream of getting married or learning to pole-vault just by following instructions in a book: we would end up with a wrecked marriage and a broken back. There is no such thing as theoretical or speculative prudence. A person is not prudent because she knows everything that has ever been written about prudence but because she makes the right judgments in choosing her actions.

So, the case method, as a particular form of active learning that deals with real-life situations, is an attempt to instill prudential knowledge, an attempt to do what Aristotle considered impossible: to teach people to be prudent. It aims no less than to teach the unteachable. If it has any merit as a teaching method, it is that it forces the student to reason about what should be done in specific situations: in other words, its purpose is to develop prudence rather than to impart scientific knowledge or erudition (whether by presentation, or by discovery or experience).

4. Scientific Management?

In light of what we have just said, we can see just how inappropriate, even contradictory, the expression "scientific management" is: management *cannot* be scientific, because it *has* to be prudential. The manager's goal will never be to manage scientifically – that would be impossible – but to manage prudentially. Thus, with respect to science and management, there are three important points to be made:

a) There is no doubt that there can be a *science of management* aimed at theoretically and scientifically studying the unscientific activity of managing. But nobody can reasonably expect there to be a science whereby managers' actions themselves become scientific, that is, follow strictly from that same science and remain valid for all situations. In the