

FROM BETTER ANSWERS TO BETTER QUESTIONS

As long as the alchemists merely sought the philosopher's stone and aimed at finding the art of making gold, all their endeavors were fruitless; it was only when people restricted themselves to seemingly less valuable questions that they created chemistry.
Ludwig Boltzmann (1974: 14)

Who is an entrepreneur? Why do some but not others recognize opportunities? Why do only a few exploit the opportunities they recognize? How can entrepreneurs know an otherwise unknowable future? What makes entrepreneurs so different?

These questions about “the entrepreneur” sound important and “big” (Fayolle, LePontois & Pelly, this volume). It is therefore unsurprising that considerable academic resources have been devoted to answering them (Gartner, 1989; Ramoglou, Gartner & Tsang, 2020). In this quest, a multitude of state-of-the-art research tools have been utilized, and genetics research has emerged as the most promising way of deciphering the presumed “secrets” of the “entrepreneurial nature” (Nicolaou & Shane, 2009; Nicolaou, Phan & Stephan, 2021). Yet, the success of such efforts is questionable, and we still do not know what is so “special” about entrepreneurs (van der Loos, 2013; Rietveld, Slob & Thurik, 2021). Likewise, entrepreneurial alertness is routinely posited as a “rare gift” that enables only a few to recognize opportunities in an otherwise uncertain future (Moore, McIntyre & Lavinich, 2021; Neneh, 2019; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, years of research have not revealed any special quality of alertness, and recent work suggests that mystified notions about such a quality originate in problematic questions (see Ramoglou, 2021a; Ramoglou, 2021b).

In this chapter, I argue that we should be more cautious with the questions that we ask. Rather than being on the lookout for “great” answers to supposedly “big” questions, we should be far more reflective of whether we are dealing with *genuine* – let alone “big” – questions in the first place. My argument is that philosophical reflection on the tacit presuppositions motivating the emergence and perseverance of seemingly important questions – such as the question over “the nature of entrepreneurs” – may reveal that they are simply nothing but pseudo-questions. That is, questions that promise to shed light on deeply-held secrets of reality, when there is actually no discovery to be made; only problematic assumptions sustaining impressions to the contrary.

On the face of it, the very act of silencing questions by eradicating problematic assumptions does not seem to be a sufficiently constructive contribution. But this superficial impression should be resisted. If a question is flawed, it only makes sense to look for better questions – not better answers to a flawed question. Consider, for example, questions about the detection of ether (Helrich, 2012). If physicists were only looking for ways of detecting this supposedly real substance, they would never reject what was nothing but a wrong question (ether simply does not exist).

Moreover, weeding out bad questions does not only *free* intellectual attention from misguided research enterprises; as importantly, hygienic interventions are positively constructive as well. For, in the very process of understanding why a question is ill-conceived, we inevitably gain a clearer understanding of key concepts. In turn, enhanced clarity harbors the power of reorienting our scholarly attention toward better questions. That is, questions that do not only *sound* great, but questions that *are* great. For the only

questions that are *really* great are the ones that promise to improve our understanding of the world.

I illustrate my argument drawing on a particularly recalcitrant question since the inception of entrepreneurship as a scientific field of inquiry, viz., how do entrepreneurs differ from non-entrepreneurs (Gartner, 1989; Ramoglou, 2013; Ramoglou, Gartner & Tsang, 2020)? Although the focus of this chapter is on this question, we will also consider other problematic questions at the core of our scholarly discourse: 1) “Why do some but not others recognize opportunities?” (Ramoglou, 2021a), and 2) “How can successful entrepreneurs know opportunities in an otherwise uncertain world?” (Ramoglou, 2021b). This will help reinforce the point that we have yet to fully come to terms with the extent to which much of our scholarship is often held captive by assumptions that give rise to misleading questions.

THE SEARCH FOR BETTER ANSWERS TO A FLAWED QUESTION¹

The past

The observation that it is only a handful of individuals who become entrepreneurs has motivated one of the most intractable and notorious questions in the scholarly study of entrepreneurship (Aldrich, 2005; Swedberg, 2000), viz., the question of the entrepreneur: *What are the essential qualities that make entrepreneurial action possible?* Logically unpacked, this question means: what are the necessary qualities whose (presupposed) absence explains why non-entrepreneurs cannot act entrepreneurially (Ramoglou, 2013)?

¹ For more in-depth analyses, please see Ramoglou (2013), and Ramoglou, Gartner & Tsang (2020). This section is largely a synopsis of earlier work.

The question of the entrepreneur was seminally critiqued by Gartner (1989) in his paper headed with the aphorism “‘Who is an entrepreneur?’ is a wrong question”. Gartner rejected the view that enterprising individuals possess some “inborn natural capacity” as opposed to “the rest of us mortals” who lack “what it takes” (Cunningham & Lischeron, 1991: 46-47), effectively reorienting entrepreneurship research toward contextual and process views (Gartner, 1985; 1989b; 1993; 1995) (see also Fayolle, 2007). From this standpoint, just as there is nothing to be learnt about dancers aside from the ways that they dance, there is nothing to be found in individuals who *just* exercise entrepreneurial action: “an entrepreneur is what an entrepreneur does” (Casson, 2003: 19). And with respect to the explanation of non-enterprising individuals, Gartner’s critique encouraged the view that they *would also* have acted entrepreneurially had situational contingencies been favourable, akin to the non-dancing individuals who also would have danced if the song had been right or the audio fine-tuned.

Although Gartner’s critique is oriented toward an unsuccessful empirical programme of the era, the notion that entrepreneurs must be endowed with “special inner qualities” also runs through important theoretical work on entrepreneurship. For example, von Mises tackles the puzzling contrast that “there are in the market pacemakers and others who only imitate the procedures of their more agile fellow citizens” by alluding to the “inequality of men [sic]” (1963: 255). Similarly, we may find Bentham, back in the early nineteenth century, contrasting entrepreneurs with the “common herd of men [sic]” who presumably lack the required “degree of courage” (1839: 23). In a similar vein, Casson addresses the fact that only a minority of people become entrepreneurs as follows:

A scarcity of personal qualities usually occurs, not because everyone has only a little of the quality, but because only a few people have the quality and many

people do not have it at all. In other words, scarcity is associated with skewness in the distribution of qualities between people. It is the possession of scarce qualities which confers an advantage on some people in becoming an entrepreneur (Casson, 1982/2003: 29).

Gartner's (1989) critique undermined a once-thriving research genre into special entrepreneurial qualities. Yet, the question of the entrepreneur returned with a vengeance following Shane and Venkataraman's thesis that so many people fail to "respond to the situational cues of opportunities" (2000: 219). The chief reason for the resurgence of the question of the entrepreneur was the argument about the non-uniform exploitation of "entrepreneurial opportunities", since it has anticipated the (largely intuitive) concerns raised by mere attention to the non-uniform engagement in entrepreneurial activity (Mitchell, et al., 2007: 3). In an important sense, "opportunity" serves as a "controlling factor" recovering confidence in the existence of differences at the individual level of analysis. "Often opportunities are there for anyone to notice; yet, thousands or even millions of persons do not notice them. Why?" (Baron, 2007: 107). To express the puzzlement in recasting Gartner's cherished analogy of dancing: the music is on, the floor is spacious, but still, there are only a handful that dance. Why?

The present

Entrepreneurial genes?

In response to this why-question, modern-day researchers searching for unique entrepreneurial qualities are typically quick to distance themselves from the answers yielded by researchers working in the "trait" era assaulted by Gartner. Attributing earlier failures to the "lack of rigorous and appropriate research methods" (Thornton, 1999: 22), they seek better answers to the question by investing in issues of method and technique (Baum et al.,

2007; Baron, 2004; Nofal et al., 2018). Most noticeably, the research programme into the biological foundations of entrepreneurial action utilising state-of-the-art research methods and techniques stands out. For example, Nicolaou and Shane (2009: 3) draw researchers' attention to "quantitative and molecular genetics" to highlight the potential salience of information "encoded in DNA and transmitted biologically ... to explain people's tendency to engage in entrepreneurial activity" (ibid: 2), calling special attention to genes DRD4 and DRD2.

It is worth mentioning that, from a philosophy of science standpoint, the search for answers in genetic mechanisms makes an improvement compared to the answers typically offered during the trait era. The reason is that contemporary research marks a departure from earlier research agendas fashioned with tautological formulations, such as "risk-taking", "optimism", or "control locus". The candidate answers advanced in the pre-Gartnerian era essentially served instrumentally in crafting predictive research projects but were theoretically vacuous (see also Nicolaou et al., 2008). Just notice that to say that entrepreneurs engage in risk-taking behaviours because they are "risk-takers" is no more enlightening than the "explanation" that "smoking opium puts people to sleep because of its dormative powers" (Lipton, 2004: 59).

In spite of the early optimism nourished by turning the lens to genetics, results are rather disappointing and the question of the entrepreneur remains unaddressed (Kerr, Kerr & Xu, 2018; Ramoglou et al., 2020; van der Loos et al., 2013). As put by Rietveld et al:

Despite promises that were solidly backed up with ex ante power calculations, attempts to identify specific variants underlying the heritable variation in entrepreneurship have until now been unsuccessful (2021: 1303).

Yet, in spite of the limited success of the relevant research agenda, Rietveld and colleagues argue that “this search will eventually be successful” (2021: 1303). Hitherto, shortcomings “hampering the identification of associations between genetic variants and entrepreneurship” (idem) are treated as fundamentally methodological and it is suggested that genetics research will eventually shed light on the “extent [to which] different mechanisms and cognitive processes are involved in the identification and exploitation of business opportunities” (2021: 1313).

In short, despite the repeated failures to answer the question of the entrepreneur, the belief in the question’s soundness remains firm and problems are identified at the level of method. What is hardly ever scrutinised is the most foundational assumption that entrepreneurs *must be* intrinsically different from non-entrepreneurs. The metaphysical rigidity underlying this scientific attitude has been chastised by Wittgenstein as follows: “On hunting for the phenomenon and not finding it, we say that it has merely not yet been found” (Wittgenstein, 1982: 15); “We still don’t know; but it is knowable and it is only a matter of time before we get to know it!’ As if that went without saying” (Wittgenstein, 1998: 46).

We turn to explain that the question of the entrepreneur is doomed to fail regardless of the choice of method or the sophistication of our research tools. The reason is that the search for better answers is fruitless when these are meant to tackle a flawed question. As we will turn to examine, the problem is not methodological but ontological. The deeply held assumption that entrepreneurs must be endowed with something “further” emerges as sound only against the backdrop of a fallacious mode of reasoning.

The structure of the core why-question

The question of the entrepreneur concerns the methodological ways of deciphering the presupposed distinctive qualities that enable entrepreneurial behaviour. However, the conviction that such endowments must exist in the first place emerges as a response to the following why-question:

Much research in the entrepreneurship field has focused on the person of the entrepreneur, asking the question, why do certain individuals start firms when others, under similar conditions, do not? Asking why has led us to answer with who: Why did X start a venture? Because X has a certain inner quality or qualities. (Gartner, 1989: 47).

Note that the why-question does not lead directly to the question of the entrepreneur. The latter presupposes a deterministic response to the basic why-question: it is only a few to act entrepreneurially because only a few can do what others cannot. It is this tacit answer to the empirical why-question that in turn lends credence to the question of the entrepreneur. Akin to Gartner, Alvarez and Barney similarly document the logic underlying the emergence of the question of the entrepreneur using “discovery lenses” as follows:

In order to explain why entrepreneurs [are] able to exploit opportunities while non entrepreneurs are not [that] discovery theory must necessarily assume that entrepreneurs who discover opportunities *are significantly different from others in their ability* to either see opportunities or, once they are seen, to exploit these opportunities (2007: 14; emphasis added).

Once again, the mere empirical fact that only a few act entrepreneurially does not directly lead to the question of the entrepreneur. It is the deterministic answer that entrepreneurs can do what non-entrepreneurs (supposedly) cannot that makes discovery theorists conclude “necessarily” that the former “are significantly different from others”.

Interestingly enough, the logical structure of this deterministic mode of reasoning has been captured by Anscombe as follows: “[i]f an effect occurs in one case and a similar effect does not occur in an apparently similar case, there must be a relevant further difference” (1993: 88). This mode of reasoning has been attacked by Wittgenstein as follows:

[t]oday, in case we actually discovered two seeds which we could not distinguish ... we should look frantically for a difference. – But in other circumstances we might give this up – give up looking for a difference. This would be a tremendous thing to do – as great as recognizing indeterminacy. We would no longer *look* for the difference, and so we would no longer say there *must* be a difference. (1993: 411)

Wittgenstein’s critique is far-fetched. The possibility of spontaneous actualisation of dissimilar effects despite the existence of identical causal structures is theoretically possible. However, it cannot be the most plausible mode of explanation when we deal with entities for which we have no good reason to expect spontaneous responses. For example, it would be a manifestation of extreme scepticism to say that there is no causal difference when, say, it is only one metal to respond to the triggering presence of a magnet. In the absence of other explanations, we are simply forced by reason to infer that one piece of metal is ferrous as opposed to the other that lacks the requisite powers.

In such highly controlled contexts, the causally deterministic mindset holds water. But the context of entrepreneurship is dramatically different. In other words, the problem is *not* that the causally deterministic mode of inference *never* holds water. The problem is that it cannot be meaningfully applied in the context of entrepreneurial action. Let me explain.

The fallaciousness of the question of the entrepreneur

In the previous section, we conceded that it makes sense to infer the presence of variously ferrous entities when it is only one and not the other to respond to the triggering presence of a magnet. But does it make sense to talk about entrepreneurial action as the causal outcome of something external? Relatedly, is it sensible to conclude that entrepreneurs must possess something “further” to explain the non-uniformity of events of entrepreneurial action? Such a mode of inference does not work well when studying the behaviour of human agents. The reason is that, unlike ferrous metals that *predictably* respond to the presence of magnetic forces, human behaviour is not predictable. Humans do not simply respond to external forces or triggers. They exercise agency.

If entrepreneurial action is an expression of human agency, we should recognise its fundamental *contingency*: 1) the individuals who acted entrepreneurially *need not have* acted thus; and that 2) the individuals who did not act entrepreneurially *could have* acted thus. The acknowledgement of the contingency of entrepreneurial action entails that we will never discover some “entrepreneurial gene” capable of answering the “question of the entrepreneur”, viz., why some are able to do what others aren’t. The reason is that entrepreneurs exercise a *widely held* human potential. To put this using possible world semantics, there is a possible world in which the entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs of our world are, respectively, non-entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs.

Besides philosophical arguments, the counterfactual nature of entrepreneurial action can be corroborated once we reflect on what might be involved when we talk about the “exploitation of discovered opportunities” (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Entrepreneurs may routinely talk about the discovery of opportunities in the manner in which they would about the discovery of empirical things, say, a dollar-bill on the sidewalk. Yet, what they typically *mean* is that they discovered a promising idea (cf. Davidsson, 2015). As suggested

in Ramoglou and McMullen's (2022) linguistic analysis, when entrepreneurs say "this opportunity exists", they do not point to *anything*; rather, the ordinary logic of the expression is "I believe that the imagined state of the world in which I succeed by doing so-and-so *can* actualize". Once these clarifications have been made, it takes a moment's reflection to clearly appreciate that humans do not "react" to ideas. They (may) act entrepreneurially only if they believe that such and such a new venture idea will lead to desirable entrepreneurial outcomes. But such beliefs cannot be the causal manifestation of a different genetic structure.²

Entrepreneurial action is not the manifestation of some "hidden" genetic or psychological "enabler". It is an expression of the normativity of intentional human action (Dimov et al., 2021; Harre & Tisaw, 2005): Humans *decide* whether they *ought to act* entrepreneurially. And pro-action decisions are not expressions of causal mechanisms obeying the regularities we observe in the natural world. They are expressions of the first-person perspective that a distanced, third-person study of entrepreneurship fails to grasp (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Ramoglou & McMullen, 2022). Importantly, these first-person stances are ontologically irreducible to biological or personality traits (Dimov et al., 2021; Searle, 1983). They are based on quite complex and subtle understandings, themselves made possible by what is commonly called by Wittgensteinian philosophers as *grammar*. This grammar involves "all kinds of schemata, conventions, rules and so on, which the people who live this kind of life use to guide their meaning-making and management, consciously or unconsciously" (Harre, 2009: 134) (Harre, 2004; Harre & Tisaw, 2005). From this nuanced understanding of human action, to "dig deeper" for the appropriate

² To be clear, this is not to reject the existence of genetic or personality differences between individuals. Such differences exist. But we need not postulate such differences in order to understand entrepreneurial action. Why postulate such "deep differences" when sober scholarly reflection suggests that "[w]hat distinguishes entrepreneurial from non-entrepreneurial action is the intention or reasons behind the action which give it its meaning" (Dimov, Schaeffer, Pistrui, 2021: 1180)? No doubt, intentions and reasons have a biological basis. But to suppose that *differences* in meaning-making processes should be sought in *biological* differences is to turn a blind eye to what it means to be human. It is to entirely discount the autonomous realm of mental life standing between biology and action (De Jong, 2000; Harre & Gillett, 1994).

“genetic makeup” is to simply misconstrue the phenomenon of entrepreneurship – if not, more broadly, what it means to be human.

To recap, the fact that it is only some and not others that act entrepreneurially does not license the conclusion that the former must be somehow endowed. There are no “hidden” entrepreneurial genes or necessary psychological traits. Rather, entrepreneurs exercise a widely held agentic potential *simply* because they happen to believe that they can succeed entrepreneurially. And their belief is due to the way that they view the world – and worldviews are not rooted in genes, or traits, but in grammars.

TOWARD BETTER QUESTIONS

From the question of essence to questions of agency

While a deterministic explanation of the entrepreneurs versus non-entrepreneurs contrast encourages the search for “deep” essentialist differences, paying attention to the logic of human agency we can no longer suppose that it must be “personality factors [rooted in genes] which explain why one person will respond to an opportunity when others will not” (Casson, 2005: 424). Once we bring front and centre the experiential substratum of action-conducive beliefs, we simply can no longer presume that entrepreneurial activity is the effect of some special constitution that allows (if not compels) (only) entrepreneurs to respond quasi-automatically to the triggering presence of something named “opportunity”. Entrepreneurs do not react to opportunities in the same way that (comparatively) unstructured objects respond to external stimuli. Their choices are the end-product of a wealth of underlying understandings dictating that they should *not* abstain from exercising entrepreneurial action: entrepreneurs exercise entrepreneurial *agency*, because they have

underpinning reasons to believe that they should do so rather than not.³ According to Metcalfe: “Entrepreneurs believe something that nobody else believes” (2004: 167). We need to know *why* it is only some who believe in more widely perceived opportunities. We ought to actively seek access to the ways through which deeper belief-strata *condition* the ways through which future world-states are *experienced as* possible or not.

Moreover, remember that the “Why only some and not others?” question channelled research attention exclusively to “some” in search for what “others” must be lacking. Having recovered the logic of entrepreneurial agency, however, we may not equally mindlessly slide into presuming an underlying isomorphism of powers. Even further, we may also discern the dawning of *two* independent research directions from the very same why-question: i) *Why* do some believe that imagined futures can actualise?,⁴ and ii) *Why* do others doubt that the non-actual is possible?

Another interesting ramification concerns the possibility of *diachronic* research into why some people came to adopt a positive mindset toward a possible opportunity on the occasion that they initially had been less favourably or even negatively predisposed. The very same rationale applies to the reverse experiential course (whenever exhibited) by negatively predisposed individuals. Critical incidents research methods should be of high relevance in developing understanding of such cases (see Karatas-Ozkan, 2011).

Another presumption standing in need of closer attention concerns the blunt idea that enterprising individuals *always* act (or believe in opportunities) versus non-enterprising ones who *always* stay inactive. Arguably, these two types of individuals may be met in the two

³ In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the epistemological plausibility of the thesis that beliefs as reasons for [sorts of] action are no less causally efficacious than material “stuff” is so well-established in social ontology and in the philosophy of the social sciences that it does not stand in need of further defense (see Bhaskar, 1998; Runde & de Rond, 2010; Searle, 1995).

⁴ Note that having broken ties with the idea that to believe in an opportunity is to exercise entrepreneurial action, the first why-question need not be delimited to enterprising individuals. It may also include positively predisposed ones who nonetheless chose to refrain from acting.

polar extremes of a continuum that may nonetheless include many more and far more complex cases. In other words, this is not to dogmatically rule out that there *may* exist such individuals but to underscore that, up to now, this crude binary conceptualisation is only an upshot of careless academic thought. Needless to say, the length of this middle space, so to speak, and the precise nature of the combinations, are issues that may be settled only by empirical inquiry.

Toward methodologically sounder questions

In order to address those renovated questions, we must explicitly and systematically rethink the nature of the tools appropriate to the task at hand. Most importantly, we need to substitute “scientistic” tools with research equipment better-suited to the task of delving into the structure of human experience. No doubt, research that is intelligible to the layperson and does not involve fancy techniques may sound “unscientific” to many. But this impression only betrays a misconception of what it means to be scientific. The mark of scientificity does not lie in the nature of the tool but in the relevance of the tool for the task of uncovering the nature of the phenomenon at hand (Bhaskar, 1978). In this vein, Harre stresses that “the qualitative techniques and the metaphysical presumptions that back them that come much closer to meeting the ideals of the natural sciences” (2004: 4). Alas, what should have been common sense in the sciences of human understanding seems to be significantly downplayed in favour of the formalistic techniques of inquiry espoused by empiricist preconceptions of how the scientific study of meaning ought to proceed (Harre, 2002; Sayer, 2001). Quite counter-intuitively to many researchers with a desire to study entrepreneurial cognition scientifically, it is the systematic phenomenological inquiry of entrepreneurial agency that shows the way toward a genuinely scientific study of entrepreneurial action.

Toward theoretically sounder questions

It would be worth pushing the non-essentialist conceptualisation a bit further by drawing clear links between the study of entrepreneurial action and existentialist lines of inquiry. If there is any tenet defining existentialist strands of thought, it is that “existence precedes essence”, a dictum in perfect line with our elaborated reorientation.

In brief, what this is supposed to mean is that what we actually become does not denote who we were meant to be. There is not some metaphysical deity or natural decree necessitating that we are who we turn out to become. And it is precisely this recognition of choice that signifies existentialism’s radical departure from deterministic modes of understanding ourselves in the world, since the possibility of choice presupposes the reality of freedom (agency) (Sartre, 1957). We are masters of ourselves, and what we become is (to some extent *always*) dependent upon our choice to act somehow and not otherwise. Moreover, an important insight stemming from the existentialist vantage point is that the realisation of freedom raises the awareness of *responsibility* for our actions, an awareness that is, inevitably, a source of *angst*, an angst that, in turn, may materialise into *guilt*.

If the very awareness of freedom to choose to act or refrain from acting is a source of angst, then this should especially be the case when entrepreneurial action is at issue, since the uncertainty of the world entails the impossibility of knowing the consequences of action (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Ramoglou, 2021a). Had we known the future states of the world that would follow our every step, then the very concept of choice would be devoid of meaning (von Mises, 1963). It is precisely the awareness of this uncertainty with the concomitant appreciation that we can choose from a number of options without, however, knowing *what we ought to* choose that is an irreducible source of anxiety. Note, however, that this is not tantamount to neurotic modes of anxiety. It is akin to the existentialist angst stemming from what Kierkegaard called “the dizziness of freedom” (1980: 61).

Taking the existentialist leanings implicit in strands of entrepreneurial theory more seriously (e.g., McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Ramoglou & Tsang, 2016), we need no longer conceive of individuals who react as pre-programmed atoms in “the presence of an opportunity” (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). In elaborating the explanatory significance of the active interpretation *of* the world for bringing performances *onto* the world, existentialist philosophy shows the way out of the nature *vis-à-vis* nurture dilemma.

Finally, although the elaboration of a research agenda along existentialist lines of thought could make a paper in its own right, it is worth construing the abovementioned research question along an existentialist landscape: what sort of understandings about oneself in relation to the world and fellow human beings affect (and how) the ways through which alternative states of the world are experienced as (Heideggerian) *possibilia* (or not)? How illuminating may the concept of “authenticity” prove for understanding action in a world in which the entrepreneur’s beliefs stand in opposition to the beliefs of the majority (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1992)? Is the entrepreneur perhaps better aware of the contingency of the world? If yes, how could this provide the phenomenological underpinnings of an existentialist theory of entrepreneurial action? Obviously, the suggested research orientation stands in need of theoretical fine-tuning.

OTHER WRONG QUESTIONS

The hidden analogies in the individual-opportunity nexus have not only epistemologically resuscitated the problematic question of the entrepreneur. They have further reinforced two poor theoretical notions at the very foundations of entrepreneurship theory. The first is the notion that entrepreneurs can know opportunities *ex ante*. The second is the idea that economic agents who do not act entrepreneurially must be “blind” to opportunities. In other words, a problematic conceptual framework has sustained the illusion

that not only do entrepreneurs possess some undiscovered genetic makeup — they further possess some rare and clairvoyant quality of “alertness”.

Ramoglou (2021a) explains how the notion that entrepreneurs possess a prescient capacity of “alertness” that allows them to peer through uncertainty and know what will work is an unfortunate side-effect of unreflective linguistic practices. The way we habitually discuss opportunities as “recognised” or “identified” simply commits our theoretical imagination to the illusion that entrepreneurs must have known *ex ante* what may happen at a later point in time. The source of this theoretical illusion lies in the untimely use of words such as “‘discover’, ‘solve’, ‘prove’, ‘perceive’, ‘see’ [to] describe items in the inquisitive life of human beings” (Ryle, 1949/2008: 151). For these are achievement verbs that create conceptual rigidities when used before achievements materialise. As seminally remarked by Gilbert Ryle, when we refer to processes of trying with achievement words, we end up supposing that there may exist “temporarily infallible marksmen and some occasionally infallible doctors” (2008: 153). After all, how would have an entrepreneur failed given that he or she “recognised the opportunity”? Even worse, this problematic representational practice sustains misconceived questions about some “mystical” quality of “Kirznerian alertness” (Kirzner, 1973; 1979) allowing some to know opportunities in an otherwise unknowable future (see Ramoglou, 2021a).

The other problematic question concerns the notion that non-entrepreneurs must be “blind” to opportunities. It is this unexamined assumption that feeds the myth of some sort of mysterious and “rare gift” (Kirzner, 1979: 148) possessed by a minority of economic agents. Ramoglou (2021b) demonstrates that the reasoning backing the Kirznerian framework is erected on a *modus tollens* fallacy. That is, the inference that the majority of economic agents are “non-alert” to opportunities rests on the assumption that “to ‘see’ an opportunity” is to *inevitably* “pursue an opportunity”. In effect, Kirzner falls for the conclusion that only a few

must have “discovered opportunities” on the basis that only a minority of economic agents engage in entrepreneurial forms of activity. “Nowhere does Kirzner allow for the possibility of a perceived yet unexploited opportunity: either alertness or opportunity must be absent” (Ramoglou, 2021b: 831). This is problematic. Even if one believes to have perceived a real opportunity he/she may simply not inhabit an entrepreneurial ecosystem that would allow him or her to exercise action (McMullen, 2011). But even if one can exercise action, what we now know to have been a real opportunity previously only imaginable – thus susceptible to doubt.

It follows that, if the question “How do only a few discover opportunities under conditions of uncertainty?” is fallacious due to problematic word-use, the question “Why do only a few recognise opportunities?” (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) rests on the false assumption that events of “opportunity discovery” and “opportunity exploitation” are constantly conjoined. This is a flawed assumption. As we saw, if “opportunity discovery” means anything at all, it may only mean that somebody imagined or believed that something (say, profit X) is possible *following* a course of action. And the fact that knowing whether a venture will be profitable can only be gained *ex post* means that we cannot reasonably conclude that non-entrepreneurs must have been “non-alert”. Many may have had the very same idea yet simply doubted that it is a *good* one – not to mention that, even if one believes that s/he has found a good idea, one may simply not have the material means to pursue it.

In all, limited theoretical reflection has sustained several questions that do not remain unaddressed because we lack better answers. They are simply bad questions. To reiterate, if the “question of the entrepreneur” requires the study of what non-entrepreneurs lack in terms of genetic structures, the question of alertness presupposes the study of what non-entrepreneurs lack in terms of abilities of imagination and prescience. In the place of the question of the entrepreneur, it was suggested that, rather than researching what non-

entrepreneurs do not have we can study how *both* entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs make sense of the world by deepening our understanding of their phenomenological grammars. Similarly, the question of “alertness” can be replaced by more sustained and systematic research into what prevents imaginative individuals from realising their potential (the so-called ‘non-alert non-entrepreneurs’) as well recognising the role of luck in entrepreneurial achievements (in the place of illusions of foreknowledge).

Up to now we have seen how limited ontological and linguistic reflexivity nurtures problematic questions. We turn to discuss further reasons responsible for letting problematic questions go undetected.

DISCUSSION

Fallacy of possibilism: The core illusion?

A particularly problematic notion in entrepreneurship research is the frequent reliance on unreasonably optimistic worldviews about entrepreneurship. As noted by Brattstrom and Wennberg, entrepreneurship research is dominated by “stories of entrepreneurship as a road to salvation and means to emancipation” (2021: 1). There is no doubt that many entrepreneurs have made it from rags to riches. Entrepreneurship can indeed be emancipatory. Yet, what is deeply problematic is our academic disposition to portray the world as rosier than it is. For, although entrepreneurship is *sometimes* the road to riches, the crude matter of fact is that “most [entrepreneurs] never get to cash in, and instead earn less than comparable employees in paid work” (Brattstrom & Wennberg, 2021: 7) (see also Aldrich & Ruef, 2018).

What is important from a philosophical vantage point is the observation that the empirical realities of failure have failed to undermine the particularly rosy worldview at the core of our scholarship. For, the crude matter of fact that only a minority of ambitious

entrepreneurs will ever witness their dreams materialise is not a recent empirical discovery. If so, what is preventing us from watering down our unrealistically optimistic narratives?

Bad theoretical assumptions are the culprit. In particular, the problem lies in the unfalsifiable nature of the possibilistic worldview; that is, a worldview in which “success is always possible in principle” (see Ramoglou & Tsang, 2016). Why? No experience is alone sufficient to falsify the presupposed “can”. Although empirical manifestations of failures abound in the business landscape, they can always be explained away as a contingent and quite unnecessary state of the world. It is always conceivable that the opportunity was there, but something went awry on the way. The core commitment to a failure-free world is consistently maintained in making the required conceptual adjustments. Indeed, it is always possible to shield the core commitment in the existence of opportunity in ascribing the cause of failure to wrongdoings or omissions at the phase of the “exploitation” stage – e.g., by alluding to the presence “greed, stupidity, thoughtless bandwagon-climbing, or incompetence whether in design or execution” (Drucker, 1985: 46). In a similar vein, Brattstrom and Wennberg argue that the problem is that “the Better Story Stands in the Way of the More Likely Story” (2021: 10). But what would a “more likely” story look like?

According to Ramoglou and Tsang, moving toward more plausible stories requires that we take the realism of our theories far more seriously. Among other things, we ought to depart from the view of entrepreneurship as a “panacea to some of our most pressing socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty and employment” (2016: 429). Instead, we ought to acknowledge that “like watering soil where no seeds exist, venturing in this domain cannot be profitable regardless of the level of effort or entrepreneurial resourcefulness” (idem). Of course, there are obstacles to the turn towards more realistic accounts. Most notably, the departure from the “emancipatory story [that] assumes agency over context” (Brattstrom & Wennberg, 2022: 16) “does not chime well with the climate of an era that elevates agency at

the expense of societal structure” (Ramoglou & Gartner, 2022: 10). But, perhaps, moving toward less popular stories is precisely what we ought to do. The reason is that making people feel optimistic is not part of our job description. This is not to deny that entrepreneurs have every reason to be optimistic in a world of opportunity. But they should be *rationally* optimistic and unaffected by the intoxicating and escapist culture of “positive thinking” (Brattstrom & Wennberg, 2021; Ehrenreich, 2009).

As importantly, making our scholarship more realistic can also contribute to creating more equal societies. In a naively optimistic worldview in which one can always get out of poverty and unemployment by trying hard enough, the failure to do so should be entirely his or her fault. For, one failed to do what one *could* (supposedly) do – leaving (inter alia) considerations of conducive entrepreneurial ecosystems aside (cf. Stam & van de Ven, 2021). This agent-centric story leaves no room for interventions that can help make the opportunities in our economies more accessible to more people. Rather, it makes us turn a blind eye to the structural problems that may not allow many individuals to exercise entrepreneurial agency (or succeed if they do so). From a neighbouring standpoint, entrepreneurs can neither create new worlds if such worlds are not already possible nor effectuate new realities disregarding what present realities allow (compare with Sarasvathy, 2001; 2021).

Furthermore, this misleading narrative makes us less forgiving and less compassionate (Shepherd, 2019) toward unsuccessful entrepreneurs. If we exaggerate what entrepreneurial agency can achieve it is difficult to explain failures without attributing the locus of causality on the individual. It is in this spirit that Ramoglou and Gartner suggest that, as an antidote against the overemphasis on opportunities, we should also start discussing threats far more seriously and systematically:

If anything, calling attention to the threats associated with business venturing can forge more forgiving conditions for failed entrepreneurs. It may help persuade governments and policy makers to engineer less threatening environments. This is feasible by establishing more institutional and economic safety nets for the agents who help economies prosper (Mazzucato, 2013); albeit often at an unbearable personal cost, and *in spite of* their best efforts. (2022: 10)

Other obstacles

Other obstacles standing in the way to better questions lie in philosophical taboos – particularly the ones surrounding the term “determinism”. According to Ramoglou and Gartner (2022), the rejection of possibilism ought to entail the acceptance of environmental determinism. However, the problem is that, as scholars, we are inclined to instinctively reject anything that sounds “deterministic”. This instinctive reaction is problematic. It is not grounded on a clear meaning of the word. Instead, it is more of an intellectual knee-jerk reaction to something that “sounds bad” (see also Ramoglou et al., 2022).

To be sure, determinism is a false metaphysical doctrine when it means that what happened was predestined to occur as if written by a “Book of destiny” (Ryle, 1954). However, determinism is *not* invariably a problematic way of thinking when it applies at the level of possibility. The reason is that certain world-states that humans can imagine are just impossible. For example, we know that existing technologies simply do not allow time travel. Similarly, in the context of entrepreneurship, success is not possible if the (current) structure of the world does not allow the actualisation of a desirable world-state – e.g., due to the absence of the necessary scientific knowledge – amongst a variety of factors that oftentimes make imagined world-states nothing but figments of a playful imagination.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I argued that, instead of being on the lookout for “better answers”, we should more patiently study our questions. Drawing on previous work, I endeavoured to demonstrate that we are not making good progress with several of our “big questions” because, fundamentally, they are the wrong questions. That is, they rest on unexamined and largely problematic assumptions. As a way out of the search for “better answers” to flawed questions, I recommended that a more studious engagement with our questions may not only reveal previously unidentified errors in our thinking; as importantly, such studies can further help reorient our scholarship towards more promising questions. To be sure, such questions need not always be as exciting as the “wrong questions”. With little doubt, the questions of alchemists were more “exciting” than the questions animating chemists. Similarly, the idea of a gene that may help predict who will act and succeed entrepreneurially may sound more exciting than questions about entrepreneurial beliefs, values, and attitudes. But, if we want to be genuinely scientific, we should make sure that our questions can reasonably be expected to shed light on entrepreneurial realities. To close echoing Boltzmann (1974) in the opening epigraph: in making our scholarship more scientific, it may be prudent to be more sceptical of the “big questions” and restrict ourselves to seemingly less valuable albeit more plausible ones.

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