

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS PRACTICE AND PROBLEM

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Abstract

This paper engages with the diversity of entrepreneurship, aiming to making it intelligible. We portray entrepreneurship is a dynamic force that keeps eyes on the horizon and feet on the ground. In the first sense, entrepreneurship is a problem. Through their envisioning entrepreneurs evade the situational constraints of the actual states of affairs and sense new problems. In the second sense, entrepreneurship is grounded in the specific practices of a particular community. We approach this diversity of entrepreneurship and its activities in terms of a reciprocal process of problematizing, involving a substantive and meaningful framing for entrepreneurial activity, and as a way towards a deeper understanding of what entrepreneurs do.

Introduction: Diversity and difference in entrepreneurship

We widely acknowledge that entrepreneurship is a diverse activity. The hundreds of millions of nascent entrepreneurs and new business owners that the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor study identifies every year (e.g. Bosma, Hill et al., 2020) do not do the same thing or speak with a single voice. Whether it is the particular practices associated with making a particular product or service (from bread to accountancy and satellite-launching rockets), the business practices associated with an industry or culture, the social practices that underpin market needs or economic value, entrepreneurs around the world blend in with the community in which they operate yet stand apart to be identified as entrepreneurs. However, our scientific knowledge of entrepreneurship does not do service to the diversity of this activity.

Diversity challenges scientists to develop coherent frameworks for understanding the world that gives rise to it. In biology as well as culture – two domains of awe-inspiring diversity

– this scientific endeavour has proceeded broadly in two steps. The first step involves detailed observation or “thick description” of particular animals or human cultures. The second step aims to place these observations into an intelligible frame or theoretical framework.

In biology, the detailed and systematic observation of life forms has led to a rigorous classification into taxonomic ranks. Thus, a lion (*Panthera Leo*) is a species within the genus *Panthera*, which in turns belongs to the family *Felidae*, to the order *Carnivora*, to the class *Mammalia*, to the phylum *Chordata*, to the kingdom *Animalia*, to the domain *Eukaria*, and ultimately to *Life*. A species is a unit of biodiversity and signifies the largest group of organisms in which two mating individuals can produce fertile offspring. The taxonomy of organisms is based on the articulation of patterns from the thick observation of morphology, genetics, and behaviours. The decomposability of the classification systems implies that within adjacent hierarchical relationships, the behaviour of the component subsystems is independent of other components (Simon, 1962). On the basis of such classification as systematic diversity, the theory of evolution helps explain speciation – the evolution of new species – through the interplay of a population of organism and their environments.

Human cultures introduce an additional, semiotic level of complexity. As Clifford Geertz states, “Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning,” (1973, p. 5). In this sense, the aim is to gain access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we could converse with them. “Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them” (p. 25). For Geertz, the essential task of theory building is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them, i.e., achieve clinical inference. “Rather than beginning with a

set of observations and attempting to subsume them under a governing law, such inference begins with a set of (presumptive) signifiers and attempts to place them within an intelligible frame” (p. 26).

This brief foray into biology and anthropology inspires to see the diversity of entrepreneurship as a looming frontier in our understanding of it. As a human activity, entrepreneurship is contiguous with human culture and thus bound with the diversity of human practices. In this sense, we can speak of how entrepreneurship manifests itself within a particular culture. At the same time, entrepreneurship can be seen as *type* human activity, whereby its different manifestations across human cultures can be deemed to have something in common and to differ from activity that we can deem “non-entrepreneurial”. This invokes the metaphor of a matrix organizational structure, in which one belongs to a particular business unit (with its distinct scope or purpose) while also engaged in particular functional role (marketing, operations, finance). In this structure, one is accountable to both a business unit head and a functional head. By the same token, entrepreneurship is accountable to both the context of its manifestation and its functional or conceptual stance towards that context.

In what follows, we seek to unpack this metaphor as a way of making the diversity of entrepreneurship intelligible. Entrepreneurship varies in the sense that launching a coffee shop is different from launching a software business or a logistics service. It also varies in the sense that starting a business in China is different from starting one in Uganda, Iceland or Mexico. At the same time, entrepreneurship represents variation from non-entrepreneurial business-related activities such as administration. In the former sense, entrepreneurship is a practice, implicated in our understanding of different social practices. In the latter sense, entrepreneurship is a problem, a type of inquiry within a given practice that creates space for new value.

Our arguments will start from the latter sense, seeking to establish entrepreneurship as a distinct type of activity. We prepare the ground by discussing classificatory structures and distinguishing formal and substantive conceptions of entrepreneurship. We then proceed to articulate a formal conception of the entrepreneur as conceptual architect, i.e. someone who problematizes current activity and thus articulates new space for meaning and value. The sections that follow unpack the notion of problematizing and connect it with envisioning. Finally, we articulate the substantive conception of entrepreneurship as practice enmeshed with other social, business and management practices.

Preparing the ground

Classification categories form a branching-out structure that can be understood in two directions. An outward direction is about drawing finer distinctions among objects or organisms that share a set of key properties. Thus, within the order *Carnivora* we can distinguish different families, and so on. An inward direction is about finding commonalities amongst a diverse set of objects or organisms, finding the lowest common denominator of properties that can define a category to subsume all these organisms. We can see the former direction as contextualization or fragmentation, i.e. multiplication of categories; and the latter as decontextualization or unification, i.e. merging of categories. In this sense, each position or viewpoint renders a particular category salient as the lowest common denominator of the group of organisms it subsumes – a point of distinction from other organisms within the broader category to which it belongs. This salient category plays a dual role: from without, it is unifying; from within, it is a launchpad for further distinction.

Such a dual role is implicit in the distinction between formal and substantive conceptions, as outlined by Polanyi (1957 / 2001) for the term ‘economic’. In a formal sense, the term offers a framework for understanding economic decisions as means-ends choices. In a substantive sense, it is rooted in the empirical reality of how people earn their livelihood, an

“instituted process of interaction between [people and their] environment, which results in a continuous supply of want satisfying material means” (Polanyi, 2001, p. 34). In other words, there are so many different ways in which people conduct economic activity. A substantive conception prompts us – upon hearing the term ‘economic’ – to ask for the specific details and descriptions. In contrast, a formalist is happy to subsume all this diversity under a generic concept.

In a sense, the formalist stance is equivalent to the functional pillar in the matrix structure. It seeks to unite particular activities performed in different units or contexts as being of the same functional type. The substantivist stance recognizes that these activities are performed in different contexts and thus their specifics can vary. This distinction reflects the broader Wittgensteinian idea that the use of words is embedded in a ‘game’ – a language-game – which encompasses the whole of language and the way of life with which it is entwined. Meaning is thus holistic and contextual, suggesting that otherwise uniform words can take on different meanings depending on where and how they are used. Consider the simple example of handles, where each meaning of handle is associated with particular activities and embedded in different technical systems:

“It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro” (1958: §12).

We can similarly think about the term ‘captain’ – whether of a ship, sports team, or school debating team – whereby the practice of ‘captaining’ (if there is one), just like the practice of handling or economic practice takes on different forms. We could thus say that the words ‘economic’, ‘handle’, and ‘captain’ are formal descriptions while their substantive meaning is derived from the context in which they are used or operate. One may be prone to

suggest that a society is full of economic activity, the cabin of the locomotive is full of handles and all organised groups have captains. These become ways of focusing attention, of implying that a society has other activity, that the cabin of the locomotive has other gadgets and that organised groups have other members, which are not the subject of our interest. Equally, these terms then become launchpads for further distinctions, based on specific context and practices.

By the same token, we can distinguish formal and substantive conceptions of ‘entrepreneurship’. In the former sense, we can think of the world as full of entrepreneurial activity, as a way of indicating our interest and diverting attention from other, non-entrepreneurial activity. In the latter sense, we recognize that it is difficult to describe what this involves without recognizing the empirical diversity that exists amongst entrepreneurial activities and thus engaging with the specific context in which entrepreneurship is manifested.

In search of form

We can deem entrepreneurship as belonging to a broader class of economic activity, which in turns belong to a broader class of social activity. In this sense, we need to identify the point within the broader classes of social and economic activities at which the category “entrepreneur” branches out. When we view entrepreneurship as the generation or creation of new economic activity (Davidsson, 2003), we use dispositional words such as generate or create to describe what entrepreneurs do. There are two important clarifications necessary in this regard.

First, some dispositional words are generic or determinable (as opposed to specific or determinate), i.e. they signify the doing not of things of one particular kind but of things of lots of different kinds (Ryle, 1949/2019). In this sense, there are different ways to create – scientists, engineers, artists, and designers all are involved in creating things and they do so in many different ways, engaging in different activities. Similarly, the profession of lawyer does not imply that there is a single activity called ‘lawyering’. Indeed, lawyers do many different

things: drafting wills or contracts, witnessing signatures, defending clients, etc. In the same manner, entrepreneurs make products, sell to customers, negotiate contracts, hire employees, analyze financial statements, and make investment decisions. Many (or even most) of these activities could also be done by non-entrepreneurs.

Therefore, faced with someone whom we see as engaged in entrepreneurship, there are many things that they are actually doing and perhaps not everything they do is an exclusive or unique marker of entrepreneurship. In order to get a sense of the formal marker of entrepreneurship, it is helpful to start with a practicing entrepreneur and begin to “peel away” activities or practices that s/he performs that are not (exclusively) entrepreneurial in the sense that they can be seen as broader economic or social practices.

As someone engaged in business, an entrepreneur performs a number of core business practices – accounting and bookkeeping, financial management, marketing, production, customer service, brand building, operations management, service delivery, human resource management, selling, negotiation, etc. We can lay these aside given that they are performed by any person engaged in business. In this sense, every entrepreneur is a business person, but not every business person may be an entrepreneur.

As someone managing an organization, an entrepreneur performs a number of core management practices – planning, staffing, communication, control, development. We can lay these aside given that they are performed by any person engaged in managing others. In this sense, every entrepreneur is a manager, but not every manager may be an entrepreneur.

Finally, as someone embedded in particular society and culture, the entrepreneur also performs a number of social / cultural practices associated with being with and dealing with others. These include building relationships, observing rituals, celebrating achievements, etc. We can lay these aside given that they are performed by all members of that culture. In this

sense, every entrepreneur is a member of a culture, but not every member of that culture may be an entrepreneur.

What are we left with? While we can peel away constituent activities as belonging to individual business / management / cultural practices, what remains is the sense of meaning that these practices have when bundled together by the entrepreneur – the irreducible first-person ontology of the entrepreneur’s intentionality (Dimov, Schaefer, and Pistrui, 2020). The meaning of the activity that would lead us to describe someone as ‘entrepreneur’ arises from the ‘imaginary’ situation in which the person operates, acting under the guidance of real but intangible markers such as beliefs, aspirations, and desired future that collectively provide a sense of opportunity that the person articulates (Dimov, 2020). In this sense, entrepreneurship entails an intentional stance towards the world. States of consciousness and intentionality are emergent or epiphenomenal in nature: although they would not exist but for certain neurophysiological processes, they are ontologically irreducible to such processes (Searle, 1994). In other words, they have a distinct first-person ontology. An entrepreneurial stance is always someone’s stance.

With this in mind, we come to the second clarification. To the extent that entrepreneurs bring things and processes (production and exchange relationships) into being, we can deploy the Aristotelian idea of four causes of why things come into being (Aristotle and Ross 1981). A *final* cause represents a desired outcome, for the sake of which the thing is. An *efficient* cause represents the agency that initiates the change. A *formal* cause pertains to the mechanism that operates as shaping force. A *material* cause represents the context providing the immanent elements. Aristotle offers the example of the making (or coming into being) of a chair. The final cause reflects the purpose for which the chair is made. The efficient cause pertains to the agency of the carpenter. The formal cause represents the shape and style of the chair. Finally, the material cause pertains to the materials of which the chair is made.

It is the setting of the final and formal causes that channel the entrepreneur's intentional stance towards the world. In theory, if one possessed unlimited financial resources, having set the final and formal causes, one could source all the necessary materials and completely outsource the execution to others. In this sense, we can see entrepreneurship as the setting of problems to be solved as well as the blueprint for their solution. This entails problematization and framing.

As an activity that involves creativity and an expansion of what can be done and perceived, the capacity of entrepreneurship cannot be limited to current order of things. In other words, a theory and an approach to entrepreneurship as practice has to become a 'field of practice' involving the capacity to move beyond the already ordered, its maintenance and rationality. This, on the surface, simple insight draws attention to the content of entrepreneurial practice – how it can be perceived and studied – but also its limitations as a catalyser of entrepreneurial action. The setting of final and formal causes involves the construction of meaning and vision as useful indicators for an understanding of new differences and their incipency in an entrepreneurial field of practice.

In this sense, the entrepreneur acts as a conceptual architect – relating and organizing things in imaginary ways to produce new meaning that can be instituted to become a new actuality (e.g. the product is produced, the customer is engaged, the money is obtained). This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) idea that the development of abstract thought leads to meaning dominating action. Action becomes a pivot through which a person moves in a field of meaning. It is in this sense that the meaning of an entrepreneur's action arises from the imaginary situation (field of meaning) in which the person operates. Such imaginary situation is well captured by the notion of opportunity as the entrepreneur's articulation of what he or she is trying to do. A person becomes an entrepreneur by virtue of envisioning such an imaginary situation and acting under its guidance. The person can meaningfully refer to

‘opportunity’ in this sense. The label ‘imaginary’, thus, implies that the earliest articulation of what an entrepreneur is trying to do is nothing but a linguistic act (Dimov, 2020).

The attraction of the conceptual architecture presented as a vision can be very powerful, as when Elisabeth Holmes’s vision for Theranos (“one tiny drop changes everything”) attracts over \$1bn of funding and a stellar board of directors. Even when the implementation efforts are exposed as a fraud, the vision remains attractive. Also, consider the anecdotal interaction attributed to President Kennedy when seeing a janitor sweeping the floor. Asked what he was doing, the janitor replied, "Well, Mr. President, I'm helping put a man on the moon." Actions have different descriptions (e.g. sweeping the floor, maintaining the building, helping put a man on the moon). Only under the aspects of the individual’s purpose or vision of what they are doing, can such actions be described as intentional in the sense that the individual can provide reasons for what they do (Anscombe, 1957/2000). Until articulated, these visions are invisible to others, to those not privy to the first-person ontology of the person in question. The practice of entrepreneurship becomes a practice of envisioning, involving the creation of new concepts, articulating new meaning and connections – disclosing new worlds (Spinoza, Flores, and Dreyfus, 1997). Notably, envisioning involves something different and not-yet-actual. It is entwined with a notion of difference and distinctions as something that emerges and the ‘problematization’ this involves.

Problematizing

As we argue for problematizing as a distinguishable activity in entrepreneurial practice, involving both final and formal causes, we do so with a reference to Gilles Deleuze’s conceptualization of problems. With Deleuze comes a radically processual ontology, where difference and diversity are immanent (e.g. Colebrook, 2002; Kristensen et al., 2014; Steyaert, 2007). Hence, being can only be comprehended as a process and emergence, i.e. as a becoming.

The perception of a being or thingness is considered only as a momentary stability in a continuous flux – a movement of perceived sameness (May, 2005). Subsequently, any moment or event has a transformative capacity and the capacity to become something different and unanticipated. In an ontology of becoming and process, attention shifts from being and stability to movements, ruptures, relations and novelty, to how something emerges and its ability to transform (Helin et al., 2014). This radically processual ontology makes Deleuze's thought particularly relevant for studying entrepreneurship, but also organisational practices (e.g. Hjorth, 2015; Hjorth et al., 2015; Linstead and Thanem, 2007; Scott, 2010; Sigurdarson, 2021; Steyaert, 2007).

Deleuze found creativity to be intertwined with sensing and working at problems (Jeanes, 2006). He and Guattari, Deleuze's collaborator, understood philosophy to be a creative practice and an 'art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 2). In turn, concepts have the dual capacity to, on the one hand, maintain current order, and on the other, to change the ways in which we experience and act in the world (Porter, 2010; Sigurdarson, 2021).

Problems are the catalysers of new concepts and shape the space in which new ideas, connections, visions and meaning get developed (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009). Deleuze draws on an evolutionary parallel of living beings emerging in processes of responding to problems. The flower's photosynthesis and the human eye are both responses to and enactments of the shared problem of light, and so even is the artist's capture of light in colors on a canvas. In addition to conveying the vitality of problems, these examples indicate a close connections between problems and opportunities, i.e. how the awareness or sensing of a problem becomes an opportunity to make something new – new connections and distinctions.

Thus, the sensing and attending to problems connects with ways of living, as a potentiality to introduce new differences. Deleuze (2013, 1983) draws on Nietzsche and

Spinoza to show how sensing and working at a problem connects to a will or desire. It is a desire, not defined or limited to a lack of something, but a productive and affirming force that has the capacity to *add* to the world. It is a longing for more than what is already here, it is affectual. It is a desire that finds ‘joy’ in heterogenic and unexpected encounters, as they are events that can increase desires ability to act in new ways. It is this desire that drives working at problems in ways that introduces new differences and distinctions, and new concepts.

Jeanes (2006) indicates a key notion of the vitality of problems and desire for entrepreneurial creativity, by linking it to personal crisis and intensity, and knowing that one has not succeeded, yet. The problem has not been solved and a novel difference (e.g. a new product, service or organization) has not been actualized to the entrepreneurs satisfaction. In this respect, a familiar metaphor would be the entrepreneur as the one still striving towards a moving target. Which is qualitatively different from the administrator’s maintenance of order, balance, and predictability in outcomes. The perceived intensity and the experienced crisis of the entrepreneur expresses a desire to work at a problem, and while Deleuze describes a joyous encounter, it is easy to see how this work can be perceived, for instance, as an exhilaration, devastation or bewilderment.

Lastly, a Deleuzian understanding of problematizing, involving sensing and working at problems, resonates with the famous Schumpeterian notion of a *creative destruction*, indicating an entrepreneurial practice that disrupts and destroys market stability, when introducing radically new products, services or processes. Sensing problems others may have failed to notice, considered out of reach or unimportant, and work at them with desire towards an envisioned future is a nascent expression of a creative destruction, oriented towards practice.

Problematizing and envisioning

Now, we connect back to visions and envisioning, but this time it becomes intertwined in a process of problematizing – of sensing and working at problems. An entrepreneurial vision is

clearly not a solution to a problem, but rather a conceptualization, responding to a problem and connecting with an imagined potential future. In this the force and context of the entrepreneurial activity corresponds to the intensity and reciprocity between problems and concepts. For instance, Elizabeth Holmes' entrepreneurial vision was expressed in the slogan "one tiny drop changes everything". The vision responds to a problem, or a set of problems, including the problem of living a long and healthy life and the discomfort or fear of needles used to draw blood. The vision responds to the problems it intensifies as a concept, drawing attention to them and presenting a desired outcome (final cause). Which is at the same time, a framing for entrepreneurial activity and engagement (formal cause). Thus, a framing that makes a substantive concatenation of various activities meaningful for a desire to work at the problems – to add to the world by preparing it for the incipient solution. One could then argue that Holmes' envisioning was so strong and compelling that the entrepreneur(s) was unable to let go of it, even in the face of technological infeasibility. Even deception and fraud became meaningful activities, as ways of keeping the vision alive.

The entrepreneurial activities involved in working at problems, framed by conceptualizing a meaningful vision, furthermore directs desire and action towards milieus where new problems can be sensed, and new futures envisioned . Thus, problematizing is an osculating process, bringing entrepreneurial practice into contact with various activities, not characterized by the same or the expected (e.g. habits and routines), but forming a meaningful concatenation of activities. Correspondingly, in entrepreneurship, we sometimes talk about pivoting, with respect to shifts in the visions involved in the entrepreneurial process. Henceforth, as the entrepreneurial process acquires a different substantive meaning, and not only content but activities and how they get organized, changes.

For Vygotsky, the development of abstract thought in children enabled them to create and play in imaginary situations and thereby escape situational constraints. By the same token,

through envisioning entrepreneurs evade the situational constraints of the actual states of affairs. Entrepreneurial action becomes meaningful when it responds to a problem and an envisioned future, but it is not reducible to an actual state of affairs (e.g. available resources, current skills, habits and markets).

Taking stock, in search of substance

Entrepreneurs sense new problems and envision different futures. We cannot speak of ‘new’ and ‘different’ in a meaningful way without a reference point. New and different acquire their meaning only in relation to something existing, a current way of life. In this sense, to understand entrepreneurship, a researcher is prompted to ask what there is. Entrepreneurship is part of social reality as “that part of the world to which experience gives us access that constitutes the realm of human coexistence” (Schatzki, 1998: 243). To say that entrepreneurship is social is to acknowledge that an entrepreneur’s actions intersect the lives of other people and that their success is interdependent with the actions of other people.

We might say that people around the world live in different worlds. In one (physical) sense, the world is the all-encompassing totality of the cosmos, of which all of us are part. In another (social) sense, a world is ‘an organized body of objects, purposes, skills, and practices on the basis of which human activities have meaning or make sense’ (Dreyfus, 2014: p.222). The social world constitutes a backbone of intelligibility and thus represents a background against which we can state what there is. To erect a worldview, we need a foundation of what we take as true or given. This suggests that different foundations would lead to different worldviews.

Goodman (1978) refers to this as ‘worldmaking’, i.e. the idea that descriptions of our world are entwined with frames of reference and that different descriptions constitute world versions: “We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described” (p.3). In this sense,

to make a new description is to re-make worlds already on hand: recompose, reweigh, reorder, delete, supplement or deform various aspects of descriptions we already have at hand. This is not unlike editing a photo to turn it into something else.

We could therefore say that entrepreneurs offer different descriptions of the world in which they live. But are they realistic? Could one dismiss entrepreneurs as wide-eyed mavericks who are not in touch with reality? It helps to distinguish here different senses of realism, namely habituation and revelation (Goodman, 1978). In one sense, realism is associated with familiarity. Something is realistic when it arises from habituation, from what we are accustomed to. In another sense, however, realism is associated with revelation, that is, the disclosure of new or unseen aspects of the world. These are revealed under a new system of categorization or representation. Goodman (1983) goes even further in a third, metaphorical sense of realism: “Taken literally, Don Quixote describes no one – there never was or will be the Man of La Mancha – but taken metaphorically, Don Quixote describes many of us who battle windmills (or windbags)” (p. 271). Therefore, the descriptions that entrepreneurs offer can be seen as revealing or metaphorical, putting the familiar and habitual at a new angle or in a new light (or making new connections, as Deleuze would have it).

Let’s turn our attention to the familiar and habitual as the starting point for the operation of entrepreneurship. Within a range of practice perspectives (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984) and an even broader array of cultural theories (Reckwitz, 2002), we focus on the perspective, articulated by Schatzki (1996; 2002), of the site of human coexistence as a variegated and constantly evolving mesh of orders and practices. Orders refer to the configuration of things, while practices refer to organized human activities, “temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki, 1996: 89). Thus, orders exist and evolve in a context of practices, and practices exist and evolve in a context of

orders. The connections between practices and orders represent the “sinews” that hold the mesh together.

Social life is marked by social orders. For Schatzki, an order is an arrangement of things – people, artifacts, organisms, and things – that determines relative positions in terms of space (where something is), meaning (what something is) and identity (who somebody is). An arrangement is “a hanging together of entities in which they relate, occupy positions, and enjoy meaning (and/or identity)” (Schatzki, 2002: 20). This conception of order goes beyond more restrictive conceptions such as regularity, stability, and interdependence in the sense that an order can be regular or irregular, stable or unstable, and encompass one- or two-way dependency. To the extent that an entrepreneur engages with things, these things can be seen as part of existing social order(s).

Social life transpires through practices. What holds together the doings and sayings that comprise a given practice are four mechanisms: (1) practical understandings of what to say and what to do (intelligibility), (2) explicit rules, principles, precepts, and instructions, (3) ‘teleoaffective’ structures such as ends, projects, beliefs, emotions, etc.; and (4) general understanding of how the world makes sense (Schatzki, 1996; 2002). We can therefore see much of what entrepreneurs do and say as the performance of a practice, a way for those doings and sayings to have certain meanings.

This perspective enables us to see entrepreneurs (and their visions) as arising from and entangled in a web (mesh) of orders and practices. The invisible threads of the web enable us to “see” how the life of the entrepreneur hangs together or interrelates with other human lives. One form of such inter-relation relates to how mentality and practical intelligibility are organized across people. Schatzki (2002) outlines two modalities in this regard, namely commonality and orchestration. Commonality reveals itself when the same understanding, rules or teleoaffective structures are expressed in the actions of different people. For example,

entrepreneurs in San Francisco, London, Sofia, Lagos or Bangalore can talk about pre-money valuation, minimum viable product (MVP), or raising Series A funding. Orchestration reveals itself when the understanding, rules and teleoaffective structures that guide the actions of different people are non-independent. In this sense, entrepreneurs prepare funding pitches on the understanding that such pitches are part of the investment selection practices of business angels or venture capitalists.

A second form of inter-relation relates to when the actions or situation of one person are objects of another person's actions. In this sense, what entrepreneurs do is directed at or is about other people. Entrepreneurs see other people as 'customers', 'suppliers' or 'employees' when those other people become the objects of the intentional stance of selling, buying or hiring. When an entrepreneur solicits feedback from a potential customer it is with the intention of ultimately creating something that the customer would want to buy.

A third form of inter-relation arises through the settings in which lives hang together. Different people can find themselves in the same setting. At certain networking events, entrepreneurs find themselves face to face with corporate executives, other entrepreneurs, students or industry experts. Conversations are shaped by the interactions that ensue and, in this way, initial entrepreneurial efforts that are nebulous, open-ended, and accidental can eventually become scalable, focused, and deliberate (Nair, Gaim, and Dimov, 2020). Similarly, the particular arrangement or physical set-up of a given setting, such as an open office space in a venture incubator or accelerator, can facilitate conversations or interactions. Setting also matters in the sense that actions performed in the same setting over time can be non-independent. For example, a client file updated with the overnight work of one person, can inform and structure the work of another person starting work in the morning. Equally, work done in different settings at the same time can also be non-independent. Product development activities can take place in the same office across time or at different locations at the same time.

Many start-ups outsource software development work to teams based on other countries and different teams can work simultaneously on different aspects of the software code.

Finally, lives hang together through chains of actions, whereby each action is performed in response to previous actions. Although entrepreneurs set out on their venturing journey with a specific purpose and blueprint in mind, their subsequent actions evolve in response to feedback and reactions by potential customers, suppliers, employees and investors.

Revisiting Aristotle's four causes as discussed earlier, sensitivity to and understanding social life enables us to appreciate the *efficient* and *material* causes of the outcomes of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs do and say things that are congruent with the lives of other people. They also work with things from existing orders. But, by virtue of being entrepreneurs, they also do and say new things as well as shape new orders.

Looking ahead

The views we have expounded in this paper suggest that entrepreneurship scholars should exhibit dual sensitivity in their engagement with the world of entrepreneurship, tantamount to enacting a matrix type of accountability. On the one hand, they need to illuminate the threads of orders and practices that make entrepreneurs part of a particular community. In this sense, the answer to the question of what entrepreneurs do acquires specific meaning only in the specific practice context in which entrepreneurs operate. Such a meaningful answer requires identification and deeper understanding of specific practices. On the other hand, scholars need to appreciate that entrepreneurs as such make new worlds within their communities – they sense new problems and imagine different futures. Problematizing addresses the dynamic nature of entrepreneurial practices and informs of their distinctiveness. We identify the entrepreneurial in the reciprocal process of problematizing and providing a meaningful framing for a dynamic and substantive entrepreneurial activity.

In Aristotelian terms, entrepreneurship is made possible through its *efficient* and *material* causes that ground it in a particular social life (present and history) as well as through its *final* and *formal* causes that commit it to a different future. Entrepreneurs define and create new value, but such value rests on something given. In time, the value entrepreneurs create becomes given, taken for granted, dissolved in an evolved social life. This happens in the same way that metaphors become stale over time, incorporated in the ever-evolving mainstream language. While social life transpires in a milieu, its horizon is ever evolving (Schatzki, 2002). Entrepreneurship is the dynamic force that keeps eyes on the horizon and feet on the ground. There are important implications here for theorizing and studying entrepreneurship.

First, an understanding of entrepreneurship as practice involving problematizing and conceptualizing suggests a genealogy of problems. It involves the ability to sense problems, to intensify them in a conceptualization of an imaginary desired future, and to work at them without respecting the boundaries of a normative (actualized) practice (e.g. routines and habits) and the order of things, but still emanating from these. Problematizing demystifies entrepreneurship and its relationship to creativity as being something transcendental and mysterious. Instead, creativity in entrepreneurship as practice involves a process of sensing, conceptualizing and working at problems.

From the researcher's point of view a substantive genealogy of entrepreneurial problems indicates a non-individualistic approach to doing research, attentive to how entrepreneurial practice is an expression of different sensed problems. This involves the researcher asking questions resembling the following: 'what are the problems the entrepreneur is attempting to solve and how?'; 'how do the problems become conceptualized and meaningful?' or 'how does working at a problem introduce new problems?'. These questions are processual involving attentiveness to variability and change; intensity and desire; and indicate how a concatenation of activities emerges and becomes meaningful. Correspondingly,

attentiveness to such questions accounts for the criticality of new meanings, differences or distinctions, and relationality in entrepreneurship as practice, while allowing for the contextual variability in the ‘fields of practices’ in which entrepreneurship takes place (Schatzki, 2003).

Attention to problems and their genealogy in entrepreneurship complements a so called ‘second-person perspective’ (Dimov, Schaefer, and Pistrui, 2020: 2) to doing entrepreneurship research. In other words, it involves drawing the researcher’s attention to problematizing as a purposeful space for engagement and a potential ‘mediated accountability’ between researcher and entrepreneur. It is purposeful because of its importance – guiding and connecting activities – for entrepreneurship as practice. Thus, the plea here to the researcher is to enter and engage with the entrepreneurial process of problematizing and meaning-making.

A second implication connects to the epistemology of doing entrepreneurship. It directs theorization and enquiry into how entrepreneurs learn and gain insights into what it is they desire and do. It is an epistemology that emerges from the prolific reciprocity of problems and concepts giving meaning to action. Here, Deleuze’s understanding of problems as a ‘mode of being of difference’ becomes relevant (Wasser, 2017: 50). It emphasizes the mentioned transformative potentiality of problems, making them a point of departure when attempting to carve out a space or a field, which is still not bound by the current order of the world or a market. To an extent, this resonates with Knorr Cetina’s (2001) *epistemic object* she coins in the context of scientific discoveries and are characterized by a lack of completeness. The concept of epistemic objects conveys dynamic, interactive, constructive and creative practices, and provides useful insights to entrepreneurship. However, epistemic objects, as portrayed, lack in attention to problems and problematizing as an oscillating process moving towards a desired, imaginary and dynamic future. These provide a frame and meaning to a (rhizomatic) selection of entrepreneurial activities.

What do entrepreneurs do? Again, they sense problems and develop new concepts (e.g. ideas, slogans and narratives) as they envision new and desirable worlds, which frame activities in meaningful ways within the communities in which they operate. Arguably, there is something poetic to entrepreneurial practice – the sensing and disclosing of something novel, not entirely actual but still communicable and desirable. Still, inventing, adjusting and re-organizing concepts and creating visions is not enough in entrepreneurship, corresponding approach to activities needs to be made available.¹

¹ The word 'athafnaskáld' in Icelandic means entrepreneur, but the literal meaning is 'action-poet'.

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