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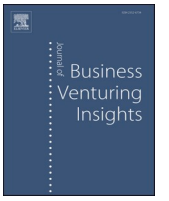

W(h)ither entrepreneurship? Discipline, legitimacy and super-wicked problems on the road to nowhere☆

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

The discourse of the twenty first century is increasingly a discourse of crisis – global warming, climate change, environmental degradation, health pandemics, geopolitical instability, poverty, enforced migration and refugee movements, among others. Increasingly these 'grand challenges' pose complex environmental and social problems that present radical uncertainty regarding the consequences of current actions and encourage multiple conflicting evaluations. We argue in this paper that in response to this 'new world' of super-wicked problems and hyperobjects, there is a unique opportunity for entrepreneurship to take centre stage, given that the entrepreneurial context itself is extreme in terms of uncertainty, time pressures, cognitive load, emotional reactions, and social interactions. However, there is a danger that this opportunity may be compromised by ongoing debates over the status, coherence, identity and legitimacy of entrepreneurship as a discipline. Accordingly, we argue for more problem-oriented research in entrepreneurship, not as an additional focus of attention but as foundational to the nature of the discipline itself. This argument is based on a broader discussion of the nature of scientific disciplines as the increasingly specialised division of knowledge and challenges the drive to establish entrepreneurship as a theory-led scientific discipline in the traditional mode. Commitment to the social legitimation of disciplinary discourse advocating problem-oriented entrepreneurship avoids the danger that consensus in the discipline is established at the expense of intellectual development, practical relevance and real impact.

1. Introduction

> Well, we know where we're goin'/But we don't know where we've been/And we know what we're knowin'/But we can't say what we've seen/We're on a road to nowhere/Come on inside/Takin' that road to nowhere/We'll take that ride (Byrne, 1987)

The discourse of the twenty first century is a discourse of crisis – global warming, climate change, environmental degradation, health pandemics, geopolitical instability, poverty, enforced migration and refugee movements, among others. Increasingly these 'grand challenges' pose complex environmental and social problems that present radical uncertainty regarding the consequences of current actions and encourage multiple conflicting evaluations (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016). They call for cognitive practices that encourage the systematic interrogation of existing assumptions, the surfacing of bold systemic interventions and

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avoidance of historically grounded feasibility judgements (Grimes and Vogus 2021), and require entrepreneurial action based on loosening the grip of pre-existing paradigms, assumptions and practices while increasing the entrepreneurial imagination (Cornelissen 2013; Kier and McMullen 2018; Muñoz et al., 2019).

However, even as entrepreneurship begins to think about how to address these grand challenges, they are being seen as more than wicked problems – problems that one can understand perfectly but for which there is no rational solution. They are, rather, super wicked problems, that is, wicked problems 'for which time is running out, for which there is no central authority, where those seeking the solution to the problem are also creating it, and where policies discount the future irrationally' (Morton 2013, 135; Levin et al., 2010, 2012). In Morton's (2013) terms these are 'hyperobjects', entities of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that they defeat traditional ideas of what a thing is in the first place. For Beckert and Bronk (2018) these uncertain futures create indeterminacy that cannot be reduced to measureable risk – crisis and disruption in effect have become the new normal.

In such a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world characterised by super wicked problems defined by their scale, complexity and incomprehensibility, complex and systematic change that crosses traditional institutional and disciplinary boundaries is the norm (Kangas et al., 2019). The atomization and specialization of academic knowledge, however, militate against the development of appropriate analysis of and response to these challenges, not least in the generation of symbolic legitimacy and the development of dominant images, or narratives (Beckert 2016), of the future which can provide effective stimulate for action beyond conventional and heuristic analogical thinking (Etzion and Ferraro 2010). Furthermore, alongside and at least in part stimulated by these super-wicked problems and hyperobjects, the organizational architecture of modern societies is changing under the emergence of new models of and language for describing new forms of distributed and collective action, such as the shared economy, the circular economy, peer-to-peer networks, open source, distributed innovation systems, and platform capitalism (Kornberger 2022).

We argue in this paper that in response to this 'new world', there is a unique opportunity for entrepreneurship to take centre stage, 'given that the entrepreneurial context is extreme in terms of uncertainty, time pressures, cognitive load, emotional reactions, social interactions, and so forth' (Shepherd and Wiklund 2019, 4). However, there is a danger that this opportunity may be compromised by ongoing debates over the status, coherence, identity and legitimacy of entrepreneurship as a discipline. Accordingly, we argue for more problem-oriented research in entrepreneurship, not as an additional focus of attention but as foundational to the nature of the discipline itself. This argument is based on a broader discussion of the nature of scientific disciplines as the increasingly specialised division of knowledge and challenges the drive to establish entrepreneurship as a theory-led scientific discipline in the traditional mode.

2. Entrepreneurship as discipline

Contemporary debates on the nature of entrepreneurship highlight a tension between a sense of direction ("whither") and the possibility of irrelevance ("wither")[1] if its credibility and legitimacy is not assured, and a shift in the constituencies making these judgements with the increasing focus on impact and relevance (Wickert et al., 2020; Frank and Landström, 2016; Dimov et al., 2022). Our purpose in this paper is to explore some of these tensions, to reflect on the state of entrepreneurship in a world of super-wicked problems (Levin et al., 2012; Morton 2013, 135)[2] and to explore a way forward, based on a problem-orientation rather than a theory-orientation, that is true to our past, addresses the tensions of the present, provides a platform for developing an entrepreneurship that offers a secure identity as the basis for internal cohesion and external legitimacy, and establishes what it is to be a 'good' entrepreneurship scholar.

Concern about the state and status of entrepreneurship, notwithstanding the progress made, is not new nor has it gone away (Table 1). The upshot is that, despite the undoubted progress made in the past twenty five years, entrepreneurship can still be characterised as a field substantially lacking a shared core of theory, research questions, methodologies, and phenomena of interest, characterised by fragmentalism and the application of incommensurable multidisciplinary frameworks rather than genuinely interdisciplinary understanding. In this respect, entrepreneurship has similarities with other disciplines: psychology's "accumulative fragmentalism" (Kruger 1981) points to its questionable status as a scientific discipline (Simonton 2004); and sociology has been described as "irremediably interstitial" (Abbott 2010) because every time a scholar makes a claim for sociological attention to be given to an area/topic, sociology has no way intellectually for effectively denying such claims. As such, entrepreneurship is not yet, in fact, an academic discipline, as it lacks its own theories and common themes of interest, but is an applied social science and field of research applying theories from other disciplines to an ever-expanding range of topics: for example, want-to-be-published entrepreneurship scholars are advised that socialisation into the field by publishing in its leading journals involves 'contributing to the entrepreneurship literature by theorizing from another literature' (Shepherd and Wiklund 2019, 4). This provides a timely reminder of the challenges faced by entrepreneurship in terms of developing and communicating a sense of academic identity, internal cohesion and external legitimacy.

2.1. Academic identity, coherence and legitimacy

A growing self-confidence within entrepreneurship, reflected in the continued growth in programs, endowed positions, awards,

[1] *Whither*, adv. What is the likely future of? To what state or place? To whatever place; wherever. *Wither* v. Become dry and shrivelled. Become shrunken or wrinkled from age or disease. Fall into decay or decline. Cause to decline or deteriorate; weaken. Cease to exist because no longer necessary. (OED).

[2] Super wicked problems, such as global warming, pandemics, bioenvironmental degradation, "comprise four key features: time is running out; those who cause the problem also seek to provide a solution; the central authority needed to address them is weak or non-existent; and irrational discounting occurs that pushes responses into the future" (Levin et al., 2012, 124).

Table 1
Alternative perspectives on Identity, internal coherence and external legitimacy in entrepreneurship.

Negative – "Houston, we have a problem"	Positive – "The Eagle has landed"
"Entrepreneurship as a distinct field of study, or discipline, is still for the most part striving to meet the basic requirements of a discipline in terms of agreement on the fundamental object of study and systematic theory with which to approach that study. It is a long way from being a paradigmatic science in anything like the Kuhnian sense, with a shared core of research questions, methodologies, and phenomena of interest. It is, rather, to borrow a phrase from Kruger's (1981) judgment on psychology, still no more than accumulative fragmentalism, characterised by the accretion of often incommensurable multidisciplinary frameworks rather than the accumulation of a genuinely interdisciplinary understanding" (Harrison and Leitch 1996, 78–79).	"[D]uring the decade [2000–2009] entrepreneurship gained an increased legitimacy in the eyes of the academic establishment and among scholars in other fields" (Landström 2020, 157) in what has been described as a "golden era" of entrepreneurship research (Wiklund et al., 2011)
"although the field showed signs of becoming more theory-driven, it was still in a pre-theorizing stage of development. …. . In the absence of their own concepts and theories, entrepreneurship scholars continued to borrow many theories from other research fields." (Landström (2020, 160; Busenitz et al., 2014; Teixeira 2011)	Since the early 2000s, it has been argued, entrepreneurship research has become more theory-driven and methodologically sophisticated (Davidsson, 2016)
in both intellectual and social terms the community of entrepreneurship scholars is heavily fragmented with few structures and mechanisms connecting the diverse clusters of interest within the field (Landström and Harirchi 2018)	distinctiveness as an academic field has been marked by formalisation around some of the key markers of a discipline (including high-quality field journals, established conferences and doctoral programmes) (Aldrich 2012; Hébert and Link, 2009; Katz 2008; Kuratko 2005; Landström et al., 2012).
"it can be strongly questioned whether entrepreneurship has actually developed into a larger scholarly community that can be considered a coherent scientific field, rather than a number of scholarly communities that study similar phenomena but from different angles and perspectives" (Landström 2020, 189).	Entrepreneurship has to a large extent become integrated in academia – education, research, positions and career systems. …. . During the decade, the academic legitimacy of the field has been further increased (Hambrick and Chen, 2008),
given the expansion of the field and the rising quality of its leading journals "[I]t is past time that the entrepreneurship research community insisted on being treated as on par with other premier scholarly communities because there is overwhelming objective evidence that supports this level of recognition when it comes to our field's top journals" (McMullen 2019, 417)	during the 2010s entrepreneurship has taken the step toward becoming a field of its own right in the academic system – a journey of almost 50 years (Landström et al., 2016b; Landström 2020, 179, 180).
"… while the discipline's ascent continues through strong growth in community membership, entrepreneurship is a young discipline that is still fighting for universal recognition as a fully legitimized academic field" (Wood 2020, 1).	numerical growth (as reflected, for example, in the entrepreneurship division of the Academy of Management being one of the largest and fastest growing divisions in recent years (McMullen 2019))
the lack of a discipline-specific elite (A-list) journal – the forum for knowledge production that creates "monopolies of scientific legitimacy" (Bourdieu 1975, 30) – is held to be particularly problematic for establishing the identity and legitimacy of the field (Wood 2020)	the 1987 establishment of the entrepreneurship division of the Academy of Management was a "coming of age" for the field (Shane, 1994)

conferences and journals (McMullen 2019) contributes to the development of a sense of academic identity. The need to respond to and take account of a rapidly changing socio-historical, cultural, and intellectual milieu both provides new opportunities and presents new challenges to taken-for-granted styles of thought and practice within the field. But this also provides a challenge, given that we now inhabit an intellectual milieu where the value and relevance of entrepreneurship can no longer be derived from a narrative of socio-historical progress necessarily culminating in the 'good society' (Freeman and Venkataraman 2002). The central task, therefore, is to construct new analytical narratives and ethical discourses that speak to the radically changed structural, theoretical and ideological realities we now face. What is required is intellectual renewal and regeneration to meet the challenge of an era in which the traditional disciplinary pathways, and older ideological equilibria, are being overtaken by fundamental social, economic, political, and cultural change.

It is in this sense that entrepreneurship, alongside other disciplines, is experiencing an identity crisis of sorts, characterised by the tension between being an (aspirational) theory-led academic discipline or an (actual) applied field of study (Lélé 1998; Klein, 1996; Strunz 2012; Ellram et al., 2020; Mitra et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2020). While not wishing to become "stuck in a continuous cycle of endless debate with each other about the same things – a wash, rinse, repeat cycle of introspection" (Schwarz 2020, 230), the issue of identity is central to understanding and developing internal and external coherence and legitimacy. This is intensified in circumstances where the sense of academic identity, (as a self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences (Slay and Smith 2011), a [role based] form of social identification (Ashforth and Mael 1998; Brown and Lewis 2011; Brown and Toyoki 2013), and a pattern of intersubjective interaction with other individuals, groups and functional areas (Castells 2011; Taylor 1989)), is weak (Ellram et al., 2020). As individuals, identity coherence provides clarity, a feeling of stability and grounding in our actions (Syed and Juang 2014); as members of a community, identity provides meaning and a sense of obligation to others (Taylor 1989) and the development of a common language, patterns of thinking, ideas and experiences (Castells, 2011), as reflected in the 'dominant design' (Aldrich 1999) of the discipline with which we align. This dominant design focuses on the definition of the concepts and phenomena which it studies, the ways in which it investigates them, and the power dynamics and conflict that establishes and maintains boundaries between groups, discourses or disciplines (Castells 2011; Jawitz 2009; Coccia 2020). As with other business school disciplines entrepreneurship has increasingly been engaged in a discipline-led theory-driven approach driven by 'physics envy' (Thomas and Wilson 2011), valuing rigour over relevance (Irwin, 2019), and marked by a growing tension between the theoretical robustness of academic

research and its insights on real-world issues (Aguinis et al., 2020; Bennis and &O'Toole, 2005; Tourish 2019, 2020).

Academic identity formation arises from the endogenous processes driving the evolution of disciplines. These revolve around the role of social interactions (Börner et al., 2011; Tijssen 2010; Sun et al., 2013; Van Raan 2000) as 'a complex, self-organizing and evolving network of scholars, projects, papers and ideas' (Fortunato et al., 2018), networks which in Latour's terms 'knit, weave and knot' scientists, institutions, concepts, physical forces into an over-arching scientific fabric (Latour 1987a, 1987b; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Callon 1986). These networks, whether understood at the level of science as a whole, schools of thought or individual disciplines and fields of study, are modes of constructing reality: 'like other symbolic constructions of the world (e.g. political ideologies, religion, aesthetic and philosophical theories) it elaborates totalizing symbolic frameworks anchored in broad philosophical theories, moral, and political views about human nature, social order, and historical development … Theories, in other words, become part of the cultural symbolism and meanings of a society; they orient and justify action; form elements of our personal and collective identity; and legitimate institutions and public policy' (Seidman 1987, 131).[3]

By the early 2000s, entrepreneurship had become a highly multidisciplinary field, and scholars from a wide range of other disciplines have taken an interest in entrepreneurship as a phenomenon (Landström 2020, 163). This reflects a wider process of scientific migration of scholars from established research networks that are declining to other networks investigating new topics (Mulkay 1974, 1975; Mullins 1973; Coccia 2018, 2020). However, much of this research has been undertaken in the context of the scholars' home discipline, based on that discipline's theoretical frameworks and concepts and published in disciplinary (as well as entrepreneurship)-related outlets (Ireland and Webb 2007). This 'silo' mentality and behaviour is not unique: across the natural and social sciences a discipline is most likely to cite itself, citations from proximate areas *i* to *j* are highly correlated with those from *j* to *i*, and applied disciplines (eg Finance) are more likely to cite basic disciplines (eg Economics) than vice versa (Shi et al., 2009, 2015). Bibliometric analyses of entrepreneurship confirm this (Landström and Harirchi, 2018; Landström and Persson, 2010; Landström et al., 2015): 'even though entrepreneurship has attracted a lot of scholars from many different fields, the citations seem to cluster within each discipline as opposed to between disciplines. This reveals that there seems to be a clear divide between scholars with roots in different disciplines. For example, scholars with roots in management studies tend to cite the works by other management scholars, economists tend to cite other economists, etc. Thus, the use of knowledge between scholars from different fields is rather limited." (Landström 2020, 163).[4] In other words, the entrepreneurship research community is divided into different and rather distinct parts with relatively little knowledge exchange between different disciplinary silos. This is true even for theoretical constructs widely considered to be 'entrepreneurial': "entrepreneurship scholars have launched and exploited new concepts and theories in order to understand entrepreneurship, such as Sarasvathy's "effectuation" reasoning (2001), Aldrich's evolutionary perspective (1999), Reynolds' "nascent entrepreneurship" concept (Reynolds, 2000), and Baker and Nelson's "bricolage" (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Even though these concepts and theories are often regarded as entrepreneurship concepts, we have to be aware that in most cases they are anchored in other mainstream fields." (Landström, 2020, 156). Further, in many cases these theories are merely descriptive, not explanatory (Kitching and Rouse 2020).

Ultimately, therefore, the existence of disciplines and their substantive focus is a question of legitimation, a process where those involved in the (putative) discipline "create their intellectual and academic integrity through cultural procedures; they select data, they create structures of interpretation, they ignore or disallow large areas of potentially relevant material which is awkward or contradictory, they set up their own canons of relevance and truth: in short, they create, the very reality that they study" (Chapman, 1992, p. 12, cited in Harrison and Leitch 1996). In other words, scientific disciplines are also social constructions in which the individual scientist undertakes research within the context of professionally defined structures of relevance (Jagtenberg, 1983). Herein lies the opportunity for entrepreneurship.

2.2. *Problem-oriented research - a way forward?*

While entrepreneurship shows many of the trappings of an academic discipline, in terms of a sense of community, shared journals, conferences and so on, the absence of a clear and distinctive theoretical core and the consequent lack of agreement on its distinctive object of study, undercuts its status as a discipline *in sensu strictu.* The field to some extent still lacks internal cohesion and external legitimacy, and calls for the wider recognition of the status of our leading journals (Wood 2020) will do little to address this. But this might be because we are seeking the wrong kind of legitimacy, and the challenges entrepreneurship faces as an aspiring discipline may in fact be the basis for (re)discovering the answer to the 'whither entrepreneurship?' question (Landström and Harirchi, 2019).

The wider context for this is one of grand challenges and super wicked problems that defy and transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries (Buckley et al., 2017; Davis and Marquis 2005; George et al., 2016), which has led to calls for the greater relevance and impact of management research (Aguinis et al., 2019; Bartunek and Rynes 2010; Davis 2015; Tourish 2020; Tsui 2019; Wickert et al., 2020), In seeking to draw up a new positioning statement for entrepreneurship we could do worse than turn to Bourdieu (1999), for whom 'a *corporeal knowledge* that provides a practical comprehension of the world [is] quite different from the act of conscious decoding that is normally designated by the idea of comprehension' (p. 135). In this, the understanding and representation of experience are central to a field of study, both empirically and theoretically, not least because experience has ways of 'boiling over, and

[3] There is a parallel here with Gellner's (1968, 431) surmise for societies as a whole, which also holds good for sub-cultures such as scientific communities: ' … the general characteristics of societies, their culture and their language, which enable their members to conceptualize aims and beliefs about environments, and which consequently are presupposed by special explanations, are not perhaps correctly represented by the beliefs of those members themselves.' The need for greater self-conscious self-reflection in moving the discipline forward is a point to which we return later in the paper.

[4] For a detailed example of this see Cumming and Johan 2017).

making us correct our present formulas' (James 1978, 106). But there is a caveat here: Bourdieu (1999, 72), citing Pascal, warned against 'two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only'. In other words, we need to escape the empiricist fallacy, that raw unmediated data speak for themselves, and the theoreticist and idealist trap that eschews empirical findings in favour of abstract theoretical categories. Rather, we should pursue a dialectic of surprise, 'a two-way stretch, a continuous process of shifting back and forth, if you like, between "induction" and "deduction" … to bring that "registered experience" into a productive but unfussy relation to "theory" (Willis and Trondman 2002, 399). What matters in bringing a theory, concept or view to bear on any specific experience or set of experiences is its usefulness in context: as Bourdieu (1999, 8), again quoting Pascal and echoing Gellner (1968) cited earlier, puts it: 'I cannot judge of my work, while doing it. I must do as the artist, stand at a distance, but not too far.' In other words, we must maintain 'some degree of attention to the integrity of the conceptual tools or views being mobilised but not respect for the traditional boundaries of subject areas or "grand traditions" (Willis and Trondman 2002, 399).

This takes us back to Seidman's (1987, 134–135) argument that all science is an organized and collective activity that 'occurs in a dynamic relation to the encompassing social context … Society is constitutive of science not merely in the sense of forming a normative context enhancing or impeding scientific rationality, but in that it informs the very processes of inquiry, e.g. problem-selection, the constitution of the scientific domain, the determination of facts, the very research results, and the criteria of validity and truth. Science must be treated like any other symbolic form – namely as a mode of structuring reality embedded in the social structure of the whole society'. It follows, therefore, that given 'the radically changed structural, theoretical and ideological realities we now face … What is required is intellectual renewal and regeneration' (Burrell et al., 1994, 5–6).

One feature of this renewal and regeneration arises from the widely observed (but sometimes challenged – Sintonen, 1990) distinction between basic and applied research (Boyack 2004; Boyack et al., 2005; Klavans and Boyack 2009; Smith et al., 2000), where basic research is held to be aiming at finding truth (theory-grounded propositional knowledge), applied research at finding solutions to practical problems (Kitcher 2001; Fanelli and Glänzel 2013).[5] As a borrower/user rather than originator of theory, entrepreneurship shows more of the characteristics of applied research than of basic research on this categorization. One implication is that entrepreneurship's search for external legitimacy as a credible discipline to stand alongside many of the other disciplines in the business school and more widely is misguided. These disciplines, with their theories, clearly understood objects of study and social and communitarian practices, represent the intellectual manifestation of the specialization and division of labour of industrial capitalism; they are, as it were, the columns of the intellectual edifice of Western thought. Entrepreneurship, with no unique theoretical perspectives or objects of study, represents one of the rows of the intellectual edifice, an integrative applied social science field of study which gains identity, cohesion and legitimacy from addressing contemporary issues and problems from an integrative perspective. In other words, entrepreneurship could reposition itself as leading the search to highlight and explore the entrepreneurial dimensions of our core social and behavioral science disciplines of economics, management, finance, marketing, and related areas – the "columns." More importantly, simply investigating the entrepreneurial dimensions of these disciplines is not enough because entrepreneurship research has to show how more than one of these areas may be necessary to fully inform the study of a given phenomenon. This synergistic quality is entrepreneurship's "special sauce" (Doh 2017; Shenkar 2004), and this ability to integrate insights from multiple perspectives and bring them to bear on a given phenomenon is the core contribution of entrepreneurship research. In this vein Bygrave (1989a; 1989b) once referred to entrepreneurship, in the context of its curricula and pedagogy, as the "liberal arts" of the business school, bringing breadth, integration, synthesis and a sense of purpose absent from the traditional disciplines. So too in terms of research. As such, it has the potential – and responsibility – to add up to more than the sum of its disciplinary parts. Entrepreneurship research is uniquely positioned to contribute to understanding modern phenomena, and arguably it is well-situated at the intersection of other disciplines and fields to do so.

It follows from the discussion so far that time spent on the definition of disciplines by subject matter and methodology is time lost for the study of substantive problems (Popper 1959, 16). The effort wasted in definition follows from an increasing academic specialization which partitions 'reality' into discrete, isolated disciplinary and sub-disciplinary units – multidisciplinarity has replaced the holism of an interdisciplinary perspective. This specialization, which has birthed entrepreneurship and which the search for identity, cohesion and legitimacy reinforces, is an almost inevitable response to the ever-accelerating knowledge explosion, not least because 'change is a threat to identity, and every change is an emblem of extinction' (Oakshott 1962, 170). Further, the embodiment of traditional perspectives, methods and subject matter in the professionalization of fields of study contributes to the development and perpetuation of this disciplinary balkanization. As a result of the social scientist's deep commitment 'by training and by the need for security and advancement, to the official concepts, problems and theoretical structure of his science' (Lynd 1939, 18), research frequently involves not only the reduction and limitation of problems, but also the attempt to find new areas of study in smaller and smaller sub-fields until ultimately 'the subject is so esoteric that each individual can rightly claim to be the only living authority in the field' (Lichtman 1970, 108). The final product of this eclectic self-development is an arid scholasticism divorced from the realities of the socio-cultural context, which reflects both the trivialization of research inherent in specialization and the inability to discriminate between the trivial and the significant (Bahm 1977).

If entrepreneurship is to contribute to or be defined by how it addresses the solution of acute social problems it is essential to recognise that these are interdisciplinary in nature, unfold at multiple levels of analysis and involve complex interdependencies among business, government and society on a global scale (Wickert et al., 2020, 11). Consistent with Seidman (1987) position on the socially

[5] There is a parallel here with Simon's (1999) distinction between sciences of the natural (physics, chemistry, biology, sociology etc) and sciences of the artificial (design sciences such as engineering, medicine, architecture, business which problematize the present and imagine a different future). The former address the necessary, how things are; the latter are concerned with the contingent, how things might be (Simon 1999).

embedded context of science, solving academic problems is not the same as solving social problems, and solving social problems is in part dependent on the solution of a number of academic problems in a number of disciplines. For a social problem, to be is to be perceived. A situation only becomes a problem after it has been analysed and assessed as an undesirable state of affairs. This evaluative act is a formulative procedure in which 'there is only too often the problem of formulating the problem – and the problem whether this was really the problem to be formulated. Thus problems, even practical problems, are always theoretical' (Popper 1976, 135). The significance of a problem rests on answers to three questions: what is relevant, to whom is it relevant and who decides? The solution to a problem – 'involves an evaluation just as much as does the decision that the problem exists' (Passmore 1974, 44), not least because solutions are about desired future states, a reflection of the way of looking at reality rather than reality itself.

If we are serious about entrepreneurship repositioning as contributing to the solution of social problems then there are a number of practical steps to be taken. First, in debates within the field there needs to be greater interaction between social conscience and philosophical awareness. This would include, inter alia, acknowledging that the ontology of a partitioned universe, which underlies and is reinforced by disciplinary specialization, conflicts with the holism and interconnectedness that accompanies problem orientation. It would also require repositioning entrepreneurship on the structure/agency divide: the neo-liberal individualistic agentic emphasis of entrepreneurship, and the concomitant assumption that individuals have the capability to change their fate through entrepreneurial action (Chowdhury 2020), needs to give way to a wider engagement with the structures that constrain and channel action. Second, there is a need for new style of philosophising that is contextually rather than internally directed, recognising that there are a large number of created human worlds loosely connected to the 'real' world and that all our understandings are approximate, a function of the interpretative activity of the observer. Third, the study of social problems leads to the paradox where, to quote Heller's analysis of Franz Kafka's work, 'truth is permanently on the point of taking off its mask and revealing itself as illusion, illusion in constant danger of being verified as truth' (Heller 1974, 125); addressing this paradox will require a 'lowering of the walls' (Currie et al., 2016) to collaborate with other disciplines in new and innovative ways (Maxwell and Benneworth, 2018). Fourth, given the social embeddedness of science a problem-oriented entrepreneurship must recognise that working towards the solution of social problems and grand challenges is not and cannot effectively be an academic pursuit alone but one that should engage with and involve those whom we study (Dimov et al., 2020), building community engagement into our research designs. Fifth, and finally, this all will require reconsideration of the markers of esteem and career progression: if problem-orientation reshapes the identity, cohesion and legitimacy of the discipline, working out the reward and recognition implications of a commitment to 'combination, connection, integration, and ultimately, unification' (Wickert et al., 2020, 20) will necessarily take us, and our business school colleagues, beyond the totemism and intellectual straitjacket of the A-list journal fetish. In short, to make this contribution, the nature and purpose of research in entrepreneurship has to be rethought: to be sure, scholastic activity requires 'free time, free from the urgencies of the world, that allows a free and liberated relation to those urgencies and to the world' (Bourdieu 1999, 1). But this is not detached theory development and testing of the traditional (hypothetico-deductive) approach to research (Behfar and Okhuysen 2018). Rather, it requires the development of a 'halfway house' between theory and topic, 'connecting up relevant theoretical insights, concepts, tools from wherever they may come but that can be taken together because all can be applied to a specific topic or theme' (Willis and Trondman 2002, 400). In so doing, we do not start from an undeveloped greenfield: there are a number of conceptual hooks upon which a problem-oriented entrepreneurship can build, including the recent identification of entrepreneurship as a design science with problem identification, scoping and solution at its core (Seckler et al., 2021; Dimov et al., 2022), the development of possibilistic thinking as a set of cognitive practices that encourage the systematic interrogation of existing assumptions and the surfacing of bold systemic interventions (Grimes and Vogus 2021), and the positioning of entrepreneurship as organizational innovation, distinctively equipped to articulating the challenges and opportunities of emerging new forms of distributed and collective action (Kornberger 2022; Harrison 2022).

3. Conclusion

As a professionalised social construction, and as a discipline in Foucault's (1979) terms, entrepreneurship has made considerable progress. However, despite the proliferation of journals, conferences, research centres, doctoral programmes, and endowed positions, the search for legitimation still appears to have as much to do with creating a position within the existing disciplinary structure of management studies as it has with creating a new structure more appropriate for addressing the major problems and grand challenges that face us in the twenty first century. Initiatives such as that described for entrepreneurship in the previous section, however incomplete and confusing the signals they send, represent a formal attempt to establish discipline through consensus. The challenge for entrepreneurship, as for these other disciplines, is to respond creatively to the increasing mismatch between the legacy of specialization and disciplinary balkanization on the one hand and the scale and interdisciplinarity of the social, economic and environmental problems that face us in the twenty first century on the other. Commitment to a problem-oriented entrepreneurship is to ensure that these political processes, and the social legitimation of disciplinary discourse to which they give rise, lead to a development path which avoids the danger that social consensus in the discipline (the devotion to solving a limited range of academic problems rigidly defined by the scientific group, as Polanyi (1958, 1963) put it) may be established at the expense of intellectual development, practical relevance and, ultimately and hopefully, real impact.

Given the scale of the challenges we face and our limited ability as individuals to effect change, how do we react? One response is to see our identity, coherence and legitimacy as entirely self-referential and inner directed, based around the totemic significance of the A-list journal. Another is to accept the doom-laden scenario that we are on a "road to nowhere" with little or no scope to change the journey or destination: in failing to address the question of 'whither' we run the risk of 'wither' as we fail to build sustainable coherence and legitimacy. An alternative, however, which builds on the logic of problem-oriented research, is to recognise that there is an

alternative future for entrepreneurship, and that, however small it may seem, we each have a responsibility and capacity to act, irrespective of whether in so doing we are enacting "entrepreneurship" or not. As the Irish poet Louis MacNeice (1966[1936] expressed it[6]:

> G. Minute your gesture but it must be made -Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate, Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values, Which is now your only duty.
>
> C. Is it our only duty?
>
> G. …
>
> Yes, my friends, it is your only duty.
>
> And, it may be added, it is your only chance.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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[6] 'Eclogue from Iceland' from *Collected Poems* by Louis MacNeice (Faber & Faber), reproduced by permission of David Higham Associates.

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