

The cover features three large black diamonds arranged in a triangular pattern. Each diamond is surrounded by a series of smaller black dots that form a larger, slightly offset diamond shape. The dots are arranged in a way that they appear to be moving towards the center diamonds. The overall design is minimalist and geometric.

# Philosophy *of* Management

Reason in Practice:  
a unique role for a  
'Philosophy of Management'

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## Reason in Practice: A Unique Role for a 'Philosophy of Management'

Mark Dibben and Stephen Sheard

*Perhaps [Man] wants too much when he wants to think, and so can do too little.*

*Martin Heidegger (1976: 3)*

THE BODY OF WORK PRESENTED in this issue and the next (Volume 12, Issue 1) arose from a question both editors had separately harboured for some years, namely: what role can philosophy play in the practice and conceptualisation of management? Contemporary discourses within the academic discipline of management have tended to err on the side of science, either in the striving for replicative and iterative advancement in the proof-laden establishment of 'facts' or, what is worse perhaps, the iterative and replicative containment of knowledge within languages or discourse that force the writer and the reader into narrow confines of thought – and thus narrow lanes by which to survey the field of enquiry. Indeed the extent of one's vision itself becomes constrained such that only those fields readily open to view from the confines of the discourse's perspective are ever regarded as legitimate; science has a remarkable degree of parochialism built into its very axiology. Unfortunately so too has logic, the ultimate science of philosophy.

As the Cambridge mathematician and Harvard metaphysician A.N. Whitehead concluded, "the final outlook of Philosophic thought cannot be based upon the exact statements that form the basis of the special sciences. The exactness is a fake". (1941: 700) Never has Whitehead's assertion been more true and yet more disregarded.

## The Place of Philosophy – in University and in Management<sup>1</sup>

Management of course is inherent in Nature; indeed it seems almost naturally selected for. The Alpha pair of a Meerkat group, the dominant male and female in a chimpanzee community, the Silverback in a gorilla troop, to name just three social animals, all have to be able to manage their respective entourages – boss them into line, yes, but also resolve disputes and thereby keep the collective functioning effectively as a unit. One does not need to be a scientist to manage! Yet it is Man that is, surely, the ultimate management practitioner. Perhaps this is because, as Heidegger suggests, Man has at least the capacity to think (1976: 3) in a way other social animals do not (apparently, or apparently not?). We are inherent decision makers, organising and managing tools, ourselves, other human beings, our environment (or not, as the case now seems to be), even other species – and not just for our own ends.

Managing, and thus management, is by the very force of Nature itself the only means we have for coping in and with our lives. The point here is that our success at management is a function of our capacity for complex thought. Improving the quality of management thinking directly affects the quality of our decisions and thus the quality of our lives. Whereas science provides the knowledge to describe the world around us with ever-greater accuracy, what management requires is the wherewithal to make a genuine *difference* with that knowledge – and the difference is compounded by thoroughgoing thought. Philosophy of management, then, is about enhancing our natural capacity to make richly informed, value-laden decisions in a world that, because of the information age, is increasingly dominated by the poverty of instrumentalism.

That instrumentalism is increasingly finding its way into the subject supermarkets that are our institutions of higher learning. This is in complete contradiction to the ideals expressed by Von Humboldt when he set out the founding principles of the University of Berlin (established 1810). For Von Humboldt, higher education is about cultivating learning in the widest and deepest sense of the word and, for this to occur, the institutions charged with this role should be organised in such a way as to produce and maintain an inspirational culture of untrammelled cooperation. For this approach to reach its best effect, knowledge must be seen as an inherently unsolved problem such that investigation and research are never complete and both the student and the lecturer are engaged in mutual learning.

In the Humboldtian model, therefore, the Arts Faculty stands at the centre, research is combined with teaching and the university operates autonomously from governments so as to be able to pursue its research in the interests of truth-seeking. Naturally, philosophy is the core discipline in a Humboldtian university; it is always and already a conversation partner of all other disciplines, in the sense of a mutually corrective encounter which leads

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in the direction of truth (Kelly, 2009: 386). After all, every discipline starts out in philosophy; the founding father of economics, for example, Adam Smith, was of course Professor of Philosophy at Glasgow and his *Wealth of Nations* treatise on economics was not only a work of philosophy itself, but was built upon the earlier *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a study of human morality. Indeed, the role of philosophy in underpinning our understanding of work and wealth creation can be demonstrated through a comparison of the work of Adam Smith with that of Karl Marx. The two share remarkably similar perspectives, concerned as they both were with the nature of human experience (Neesham and Dibben, 2012) – which is to say that economics and wealth creation in general, and management in particular, must be morally and philosophically based.

Despite the importance of philosophy as the foundation stone of all the other disciplines, in the current academic institutional model, the science faculty has been elevated to the core. Most teaching is manifestly separate from research, and the university is increasingly controlled by government to engage in research for the pursuit of... what? successful competition between nation states? Philosophy has been relegated to a side show, a happy self-indulgent irrelevance tucked away in an arts faculty that is itself increasingly viewed as... well, we are not sure quite as what exactly. But we suspect it is viewed as having remarkable little practical value!

This is in contradistinction to the original intention, where the ever numerous fields of study were to be brought together by philosophy's capacity to show how the various results complemented each other. Although Kant and Descartes' separation of mind from matter allows us at least to comprehend why there was little serious engagement by philosophers with the natural sciences, we must turn to the human sciences to see the beginnings of a philosophical application to scientific fields of inquiry. The trouble here is that this 'philosophical' approach to science is more akin to a scientific approach to philosophy; the production of conclusions as final answers based on rigorous iterations of established fact. For modern philosophy, therefore, with certainty as the sole purpose, the scope of the inquiry must be restricted to the extent that there is no longer any prospect of synthesis; philosophy is nothing more than a research field like any other. Martin Heidegger's assertion in *What is Called Thinking?* that "the academic discipline does not think" has never had greater relevance than now; the modern research university is no longer concerned with the development of an all-encompassing vision or a mutual understanding. And it is for this reason that modern university education can rightly be argued to be at best de-natured and at worst manipulative (Lebech, 2009).

Contrary to popular understanding, a Humboldtian university in the true sense is the precise opposite of a modern scientific university institution.

In line with Humboldt, if it is to be effective at all beyond the mere control of operations, management must extend its concern into the realm of the humane. This requires it be aware of its natural inherence, resist any propensity for manipulation and thereby achieve not only an all-encompassing vision but a mutual understanding. For the World War Two British General, Bernard Montgomery, a leader's success comes from "the capacity and the will to rally men and women to a common purpose, and the char-

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acter which inspires confidence." He argued: "The success of a Leader does not arise from following rules or models. It consists in an absolutely new comprehension of the dominant facts of the situation at the time, and all the forces at work" (2010: 80, 82). Montgomery was clear that for this to be achieved, policy detail had to be left to his staff; he was only focused on the big picture and on who the right people were to achieve the big picture he envisioned.

While the scientific approach to management may allow us to state and enumerate both the "dominant facts" and "all the forces", the "absolutely new comprehension" is only possible through a philosophical approach. Philosophy, as Humboldt envisioned and as Montgomery practised in his remarkably successful military career, is the very foundation of any thoroughgoing, serious-minded management. The worst decisions are those taken after some thought has been expended, the Heideggerian questioning has begun, but the rush to act curtails further contemplation.

It is not enough to think a little before one makes decisions; one must think *a lot*. But by 'a lot' we don't mean necessarily a lot of time, rather a lot of *depth*. One must get beyond opinions, ideas, premises and conclusions towards a hard-core, common-sense visioning and articulation of the way the world is (Griffin, 1998; Heidegger, 1976) – in Montgomery's terms "an absolutely new comprehension". Only then can managerial action have any hope of being apposite. In short, a manager must be a philosopher; s/he must be a philosopher-manager; thinking must be a way of being.

### *A Role for a Philosophy of Management?*

There has long been an interest in the role philosophy can play in enriching the intellectual basis of management both in theory and in practice. However, this has increasingly tended to be embodied in the sub-disciplines described as 'critical management' or 'postmodern organisation studies' or 'organisation theory'. A criticism of this otherwise sometimes excellent work might be that it rarely deals with the thinking of its chosen philosophers in depth; rather it perhaps creates a discourse that is otherwise describable as 'sound-bite philosophy', a quasi-philosophical literary criticism set within a sub-disciplinary axiology in which breadth of philosophical citation is deemed a better indication of expertise than in-depth treatment and thoroughgoing application.

In addition, rarely does this work consider the application of philosophy to the practice of management. In contrast, applied philosophy – which is an approach potentially made coherent by a 'philosophy of management' rather than one of 'organisation' as previously represented within the organisational theory traditions – might move beyond broad-sweeping commentary or ostensibly coherent argument based around the appropriation of apparently similar thinking from numerous philosophers to the wholehearted attempt at unpacking management phenomena by the systematic and in-depth application of the work of a particular philosopher; the potential for error in interpretation is reduced. In this sense,

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therefore, the rich history of philosophical enquiry remains largely untapped. It is perhaps an aim of a 'philosophy of management' to encompass and absorb both philosophical and managerial traditions.

In the light of this position, there is a clear requirement for a scrutiny of the inter-relationship of organisational theory relative to the area of a 'philosophy of management'. That is, a close debate of what is distinctive about a philosophical approach to management and whether this ought to be distinct from the extant approaches currently represented by CMS and OS. We must consider the evolving role of philosophy relative to the study of management and how a philosophy of management can conceptualise itself relative to its close cousin in organisational theory.

Yet philosophy of management must appeal to those utilising sources from a range of philosophical traditions and, in some sense, engaging in comparison of competing claims relative to the formulation of a particular niche for a 'philosophy of management'. Engaging in philosophy of management requires a utilisation of the particular ideas of individual philosophers and exemplifying those ideas relative to either organisational theory and/or management practice; a striving to maintain a balance between theory and practice; and a reflection at a meta-theoretical level regardless of the approaches taken.

If one considers the original title of this journal itself, *Reason in Practice*, then there is established at once two unique identifiers – "reason" and "practice". In some sense, if these two features were considered to be the singular aspects which differentiated the journal *Philosophy of Management*, then there is a transcendent aspect in reason (Gellner, 1992) and a practice aspect in relation to the problematic nature of truth claims in management knowing (Griseri, 2002). The latter problematic arises at least in part from the charge of management being in some sense tied or conjoined to a political order which cares little for either philosophy or truth, but merely economic growth (at whatever level of analysis). Here, philosophy allows a rendering of value to be arrived at that is more than economic worth, grounded in the thought of a particular philosopher or philosophical tradition; the value of the approach itself can then be typified legitimately as a 'philosophy of management' as opposed to a further theory of organisation. In this sense, approaches from philosophy are able to stand above contemporary trends in management discourse, as exemplified in areas or approaches such as critical management studies. Philosophical approaches towards management can then be 'critical' without being reactionary for the sake of it; a 'philosophy of management' is at once a critic and informant to management practice in a way, we suggest, that the increasingly conceptual discourse of critical management studies is no longer able to be.

In this sense, philosophy of management provides scope for the deployment of philosophy in marginal or eccentric areas related to sub-divisions normally not felt to be the province of management, such as the post-colonialism of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Irwin, 2007). In this regard, philosophy of management moves beyond an organisation studies type of putative forum for the working out of the influences of this or other areas of thematic interest, by not applying the same degree of axiological stricture that has come to be a key facet of that field of management studies. As such, it is able to address itself

quite legitimately to topics that lie not far from the surface in the day-to-day practice of management, and indeed all human relations, such as the luminal, mythological and even theological. In opening up the field of inquiry, re-connecting management and the experience of managing with the genuineness of its place in Nature, a philosophy of management allows a fuller consideration of issues of the 'other' or difference outside the usual contexts of application within OS or CMS, and offers particular scope for studies which address aspects of management practice as *leitmotif*.

Further, the popularisation of the local narrative as opposed to more grandiose designs of a meta-narrative perspective, suggested by some features of postmodernist thought, has tended to resist the idea of approaches to organisation theory as having a 'truth claim'. Consider the aspect of evolving typological or theoretical modes of clarification of knowledge approaches towards management theories (see for instance Schipper, 2005), or approaches which might dwell on particular philosophical themes, such as, for example, scepticism (Grayling, 2008). Philosophy of management can utilise typologies or 'grand debates' to exact purchase, through a philosophical enquiry, on the instantiation of a truth claim even when the topic of study is inherently 'social'. And yet, at the same time, it can encompass issues embedded in the continental traditions critical of nomothetic knowledge, approaches which emphasise the limitations of rational enquiry. In short, philosophy of management can apply approaches from different traditions of philosophical enquiry to enable a comparative evaluation that provides practical insight by moving beyond the reason itself, to grapple with the managerial implications of the realities surveyed.

### *Practices, Existences, Locations – and Roles*

In the light of the foregoing, the papers in this issue concern themselves for the most part with setting out the broad premises for a philosophy of management, while those in the second (Volume 12, Issue 1) concern themselves with a more applied stance. The discussion here begins purposefully with a practitioner perspective from Laurent Ledoux, who sets out the role of philosophy in the 'toolkit' of a consultant. He argues that philosophy can help managers to clarify continually their relation to the world, resolve genuine dilemmas in their work lives, and share knowledge and stimulate collective intelligence through the practice of discursive and rational thinking. For Ledoux, however, philosophy is the *sine qua non* of management consulting precisely because it is not concerned with being useful in and of itself. It is not a tool in the toolkit, but rather the bag in which the toolkit is stored; a philosophical approach allows the consultant or practising manager to ask candid questions about the meaning of the actions of every person in the organisation, not as an employee but as a *person*. Philosophical dialogues, therefore, provide a platform for a true exchange of views, unhindered by the pressure of being profitable and, at the same time, without being pre-occupied with the latest 'best practices'. Philosophy's importance for

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management lies in the positive impact a philosophical approach has on performance, *not* as a result of the pursuit of performance but instead from the pursuit of truth and liberty that are inherent in the practice of philosophical inquiry.

Taking up the question of the fundamental basis upon which a philosophy of management can be established, MacMillan, Yue and Mills turn their attention to a particular philosophical genre, that of existentialism. They posit that for management to have relevance it must place a primacy upon the individual and the interaction between the existential self that is continually being formed within the workplace. Yet, beyond this, it must provide for a coherent examination of individual- and organisational-level decision making and ethics as an integral part of the philosophy. At the same time it must allow for an understanding of the meaning of work by placing an emphasis on the experiential process of managing. In this way, the authors argue existential thought is able to benefit the pragmatic world of work and the applied act of management.

G. Loek J. Schönbeck builds on an existentialist position to consider the question 'is pathology dysfunctional?' Using this as a backdrop, he considers whether a unique role can be afforded to 'a' philosophy of management over and above any other philosophy. He further unpacks this by establishing and examining some core questions: when we speak about philosophy of management, we must ask which philosophy is at stake and what finery might such a philosophy bear; then, we must ask what we can *say* about it, and how we know we can or cannot say something about it. It is only then that the matter of that philosophy's relation to rationality in the context of reasoned practice can be explored. In offering up a range of related problems and possible solutions seen through the lens of what he terms "non-philosophical disciplines", Schönbeck reappraises the relation between critical management studies and organisational studies on the one hand and philosophy of management on the other.

Steven Wallis returns to Ledoux's metaphor of the toolkit, weaving a line between the practitioner perspective of Ledoux and Schönbeck's questioning of the space between the genres of philosophy of management, critical management studies and organisation studies, and building on Wittgenstein's metaphor of a toolbox to introduce the metaphor of "tool confusion". That is, he considers how the misapplication of differing conceptual constructs affects the advancement of management theory. Moving beyond metaphor, he investigates a theory of management through two specific philosophical lenses (Popper and Lyotard). This analysis tests both the theory and the philosophies with regard to how each philosophy may be applied as a tool to advance theory towards more effective application. As a result of his study, Wallis argues that the application of partial philosophies is not as useful as the application of complete philosophies. Deeper contemplation, however, suggests that there is no upper limit to the completeness of philosophies. Thus, the problem of completeness is inescapable. In place of completeness, therefore, he argues for the use of perceptual tools that are more specific, foundational and concise. Engaging in a second investigation, he uses structures of logic (circular, linear, branching and co-causal) to investigate the subject theory. Insights generated during this investigation suggest at least two important conclusions relating to the structure of theory and the fuzziness of theory. This allows Wallis to



suggest both the use of rigorous methods for advancing theories and a more normative role for the philosophy of management that will support the accelerated advancement of management theory and practice.

In short, thus far we have not answered the implied question 'is there a special role for philosophy in management?' so much as suggested that management thought just precisely must be philosophical thought, and that the role for philosophy of management must be both ephemeral and concrete for the *reasoning* that is philosophy of management to have an impact on the practice of Management itself. The second set of papers (in Volume 12, Issue 1) will turn attention more to the application of philosophic thought to both management studies as a discipline and management as a practised action; the *practising* of philosophy of management. We will, for example, pick up the question of truth and the role of philosophical discourses in practice, consider what role critical realism has for organisation studies, and even grapple with postcolonial storytelling and quantum physics.

We can already conclude, however, that if it is to contribute to the development of human understanding of Nature and of our interaction with it in such a way that it can benefit humanity, then management thought must be thoroughgoing, serious-minded and properly considered. The technological quickening of life does not obviate the need for thoughtfulness. Rather, it makes *sufficient* thoughtfulness an imperative.

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### DR MARK DIBBEN

Dr Mark Dibben is Head of the School of Management at the University of Tasmania. His research focuses on what he terms Applied Process Thought – the thoroughgoing application of process philosophy, and particularly Whiteheadian metaphysics, to topics in the sciences and the social sciences. Other research interests include the role of trust in organisations. From 2007 to 2011 he was the Executive Director of the International Process Network, the overarching coordinating body of thirty process philosophy research centres around the globe; he remains on the Board. Recent publications include papers on distrust in audit firms, legal constraints in the management of child protection services and a comparative analysis of the philosophies of Karl Marx, Adam Smith and A.N. Whitehead. He is a co-editor of *Philosophy of Management*.

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### DR STEPHEN SHEARD

Dr Stephen Sheard gained his PhD in Management from the University of Kent in 1999 and has held several lectureships since then. He is currently taking time away from academia as a free-lance writer and consultant to a local authority in the area of geriatrics and business practice, while caring for his own very elderly mum; repaying her endeavours for him throughout her life. His research includes the questioning of post-modernist discourses in management and how these relate to the key philosophical genres claimed as their origin. Other interests include intellectual history more generally and how this can be linked to organisational theory as an evolving discourse.

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