Editorial: Challenges

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All philosophy challenges assumptions, of what is, of what we know, of what is valuable. Philosophy of Management challenges these assumptions as they relate to organisations and management. However, as with philosophical enquiries into other professional fields such as education, or health care, this subject also enquires into *practice*. Not in the sense of asking empirical questions about what managers do, how do they account for their behaviour, what are the trends in managerial behaviour - there are other disciplines that deal with these questions. Rather it challenges the very ideas of practice that underpin management. Challenge can surface in several ways – relating theory to concrete situations, reflecting on experience, exploring what a term such as ‘concrete’ or ‘experience’ may mean in a managerial context. The implications of this may apply to individuals, to specific industries, to the very social and political ideologies that drive modern management.

The papers in this issue do not at all present a thematic whole, rather they offer very different kinds of challenge to current orthodoxies, reflecting different approaches to philosophising about management. They are not all ‘practice’ based contributions, but they all question managerial practice in their different ways.

In his conference paper, ‘Sustainability and Management’ (delivered at the Philosophy of Management conference in Oxford in 2012) Robin Attfield explores the implications and assumptions of the arguments relating to sustainability. He indicates the wide range of different interpretations of the concept, as well as expanding the usual range of consequences deemed to flow from sustainability, so that not only natural phenomena and activities should be covered, but also social systems and outcomes. One trend of his argument is that the market economy – capitalism – although based on an expansionary principle may still contain seeds of at least part of the solution to the threats of unsustainable business practices. Whilst Robin does not directly use the language of ‘bright green’ technologies, that help maintain a growing global economy without damaging the environment, these would be at least consistent with his approach.

It is worth noting that, in this paper, the argument is, if not human-focussed, at least directed toward the significance of environmental phenomena in terms of human impacts. Note also

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that the argument here does not address the views of so-called ‘deep’ greens, for whom human existence has no greater significance than any other forms of life (and therefore the social dimension of sustainability is of little if any significance). In a managerial context one might be tempted to regard this position as too remote from commercial realities, but then that was once said in relation to animal rights. Perhaps of more direct relevance is the treatment of growth. The argument here has force to persuade, *ad hominem*, an adherent of market economics that sustainability is consistent with capitalism, and indeed that the latter can adopt ways to maintain ecological sustainability without abandoning market principles. In doing so, it might appear to concede those principles, notably those of growth, which themselves might be contested by more radical green proponents.

One of the cornerstones of much management writing and conceptualisation is change. Like sustainability the terminology is loose, admitting of many interpretations – this can be an advantage as often as a source of difficulty. Finn Janning takes a Kierkegaardian perspective (if seen somewhat through the lens of Deleuze) on the concept of *seduction* as a way to conceive change. He takes a fluid approach to change, seen as a continuing process – hence his question of seeing how one can *refrain from stopping change* (perhaps not exactly the same as continuing a perpetual change process). One striking statement, derived from Carl Rogers, is the idea that ‘everything begins in the middle’ – that at the first moment of reflection, something has already happened, one has already been committed, to an action, a belief, a form of being. Another crucial conclusion of Janning’s discussion is to place the central interest of change management with the *object* of seduction/change, not the agent of it. We can see an immediate shadow fall across much of organisational literature, which frequently sees the task of change management to be how to get others to agree to a change that has already been decided by some party (e.g., CEO, senior management team) whereas for Janning, the challenge is how change reflects those parties who are not the decision-makers, but those on whom the decision is placed (dare one say, at times on whom a decision is *inflicted*). *Ad hominem* this paper is not – it is unlikely that a manager entrenched in top-down change management is likely to respond positively to this argument, but it does present an original focus on this phenomenon.

In philosophising we are always looking at concepts. John Branch and Francesco Rocchi address directly the idea of how do concepts develop, and how does process this relate to business? Almost teasingly, they entitle their account a *primer*, though as with many primers this is not an attempt to cover a wide terrain so much as the provision of the means for the individual to make their own exploration.

They decide to treat management ideas as scientific, as contributing towards a knowledge of what management is – a substantial decision, to which there are alternatives. Seen as *science*, management ideas are found wanting, insufficient in relation to the robustness with which concepts develop, how they are understood and how this is captured in definitions. The argument of the authors rests on a close attention to specific processes of concept development, unafraid to blend direct empirical tests of a definition with speculative, analytical accounts of the process of conceptualisation, which they see in the main as evolutionary. One of the great strengths of their approach is an avoidance of the descriptive tradition that has bedevilled much teaching material on management research, leading to many postgraduate students forming wholly inappropriate views about the role of method and the nature of methodological decision in relation to how far their dissertations and theses approach any kind of truth.

Though the authors do not argue the point in any detail, their approach is entirely consistent with revolutionary views of scientific development – for every radical new idea has its roots in

a historical tradition of knowledge development: relativity building on existing concepts of space and time, even though transcending them, biological evolution resting on (and subsequently affirming) the existing Linnaean categorisation of plants and animals. It would be interesting to see how the approach of Branch and Rocchi is elaborated in the context of the history of the philosophy of natural science in the middle of the twentieth century, and in particular to that strand of thinking that Paul Feyerabend (1975) represented, when he argued that no single methodology could represent the ideal model of the forward progress of science.

Martin Kelly's paper, delivered at the 2014 Philosophy of Management conference in Chicago, although written by a professional academic, speaks in a voice that is significantly more like a practitioner than a professor (not that either is superior to the other, so much as complementary). The paper in many respects reads as a kind of confessional reflection on the experience of being and teaching in a business school, and the personal track that Kelly took to reach and then fulfil this role. Informed as it is by a good range of academic material, this is closer in style and spirit to the approach sometimes identified as *philosophy of everyday life* – taking 'ordinary' human experience and extracting significance from it. In this case the significance being challenge of what kind of person one should be, in the modern corporatized world. Echoes of Kierkegaard, though reflecting a quite different kind of personality.

The challenge represented by this narrative could superficially be misinterpreted as a well trodden argument against taking purely financial values as the basis for business. But this would miss the underlying subtlety here, which is to show how this argument is worked out in the concrete circumstances of management education, and how a subliminal curriculum, driven by the spurious versions of scientism that Branch and Rocchi critique, leads to a violation of the kind of sustainability that Robin Attfield discusses.

Though written from very different philosophical orientations, and presenting in many respects contrasting arguments, these papers continue that long tradition of philosophy to confront the taken-for-granted, the established, the dominant. It is our responsibility, as readers and critics, to ensure that the confrontation has positive impact on business at a time when challenge is needed more than ever.

References

Feyerabend, P. 1975. *Against Method*. New York: Verso Press.