Editorial: Meanings and Processes

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This issue departs from the standard policy of the journal, which is to cluster papers on the basis of similarities or connections in content. In view of recent and forthcoming issues, several of which are already closely themed, we are in this issue publishing papers that were accepted some time ago, rather than due to any specific content link. However, serendipitously, there are overlapping areas with meaning, with different implications of the work of Heidegger, and with our understanding of organisational process.

Miriam Green's paper, one of a series presenting the implications of our misrepresentations of well-established management theories, looks at some of the educational consequences of misreadings or misinterpretations of such theories. Her argument is that such misreadings are a symptom of the continuing dominance of neo-liberal thought on mainstream business practice and education. This dominance leads, Green argues, to a view of organisations as rational objective sets of processes, that can be successfully explored by methods analogous to those of natural science. Hence theory in management becomes subject to the expectation that it resemble empirical natural science – even though much successful management research is based on other philosophical foundations. Green's conclusion is that management theory, as much as other parts of modern human existence, has become subject to the 'commodification of everything.' Perhaps advanced economies have moved away from social organisational based on political representation, to a new social form, commoditocracy?

The paper by Helms and Dobson also considers shortcomings in the idea of organisation, in this case by looking at the idea of artisan business – the perspective of management and production in terms of the application of craft and skill, as opposed to seeing modern organisational activity by analogy with rational machines. This perspective brings out elements such as a focus on practice and on community as being key features of organisational activity, and on the relatively neglected ethical virtue of the pursuit of excellence. They then turn to Heidegger, his critique of 'calculated value' and his conception of meaning in *The Thing*, a conception they (and he) argue has been lost from our modern fetishism of production and consumption (perhaps another manifestation of commoditocracy?). Their resolution of this is

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to recognise the aesthetic in business, in production, in goods that are made and sold. The organisation's outputs are thus part of the truth of the business - in Heidegger's sense of revealing itself to the world.

One area for debate with this approach is that it reads – to this editor at least – as being aspirational, which invites the question as to whether this is an analysis that can or should apply to all organisations: if not then the argument is likely to descend into truism. If, on the other hand, the argument does apply to all organisations, which from the tenor of the paper appears to be more in line with the authors' intentions, then we need to consider whether this is a proposal or a statement of ontology: are we to strive to make organisations into aesthetic collectives, or are they already so, albeit in many cases unknowingly? Helms and Dobson's paper seems to take a more cautious approach – that this is an alternative way to evaluate organisations – and they acknowledge that as such there is a practical issue of whether or how most organisations might take up this perspective.

Langenberg and Wesseling's paper also takes a Heideggerian theme, albeit through the lens of Carl Weick's work on sense in organisations. In contrast to the argument of Helms and Dibson, the ontological implications of this paper are announced at the start of the paper – what is an organisation, they ask. They show how the idea of calculative rationality, a spring for theorising about organisation and management, has been superseded as organisational processes have become ever more complex, and more communicative. The authors recognise the arguments for sense-making as involving a significant element of philosophical analysis, and their paper aims, in part at least, at filling in philosophical gaps in Weick's argument. Much of the discussion of the nature of organisation will be familiar, in tone at least, to those who have ingested the work of writers such as Gareth Morgan (see, for example, Morgan 1986). However, rather than simply noting the flexibility of 'organisation' as an idea, Langenberg and Wesseling explore the underpinning of this. In their (and, so they argue, Weick's) view of organisation, a definition in terms of design moves to the side, to be replaced by understanding (not definition, note) in terms of process and dynamic evolution. The idea of structure is replaced by the metaphor of improvisation.

As noted above, the idea of interpreting organisations in social constructivist terms is not of itself new. However, the paper traces the linkage between Weick's account and Derrida's idea of deconstruction, this in turn founded upon the Heideggerian ideas of ground and groundlessness. The implications the authors draw from this are that organisations need to move away from calculative thinking, where purposes are tightly defined, rationally explored, and then definitively concluded, to a more dynamic image where meaning arises collectively and fluidly.

In common with the Helms paper, we again need to consider how far this perspective is intended to reflect what all organisations currently are, or does it apply – currently – to only some? Again, it appears to be a position that *can* be applied universally, though this needs advocacy for corporations to acknowledge what this approach involves.

We also include here three book reviews. Why might we consider a text as established as Peter Checkland's landmark text on soft systems? (Checkland and Scholes 1999) One reason is that philosophically grounded critiques of the idea are neither readily forthcoming nor actively promoted in the literature – echoes of Miriam Green's view of the dominance of neo-liberalism on management thinking. Another is that this brings out the importance of bringing the traditional philosophical concerns – of what can we know, what can we do, how should we feel – not solely to the grand theories of management but also to the day-to-day techniques that inform management perceptions and choices.

History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake, so the hero of James Joyce's *Ulysses* states (Joyce 1922). Perhaps the message of these papers is that, so far as organisations and management is concerned, we have the power to awaken ourselves.

References

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