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**On cognition and action in organisational life: Management
and the situated body in-the-world**

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to question one of the most fundamental assumptions in management theory: thought as an activity separate from ongoing action in the world. The practical manifestation of this assumption in organisational life is vast; examples vary from the exotic such as strategic planning ‘think tanks’ and expert systems to the mundane such as policy and procedure documents and minutes of meetings. The paper argues, using the work of existential phenomenologists such as Bergson, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Henry and others, that thought is nothing other than my always already embodied and situated doing and talking in the world. It argues that thought can not be disembodied and then re-embodied in the way assumed by, for example, the strategic management literature. The modest aim of the paper is to generate reasonable doubt about that which we have taken as self-evident in everyday life and in management discourse and practice: namely, that we—and likewise organisations—*think* before, while or after we act as a separate and distinct activity from action itself.

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Abstract

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, at least since Descartes, cognition and action have been seen as two distinct domains of being in the world in line with the more general of the separation of body and mind. In this view the body is a tool at the disposal of the mind. Intentions are formed in the mind and implemented through the body. Management theory, from its inception, accepted this ontology as the foundational principle of organising. A particular expression of this organising principle is the work of Taylor as articulated in his *Scientific Management*. In his conception managers are the ‘mind’ that plans, decides and solves, and operators are the ‘body’ that acts, implements and realises the intentions of the mind:

Thus all of the planning which under the old system was done by the workman, as a result of his personal experience, must of necessity under the new system be done by the management in accordance with the laws of the science... *It is also clear that in most cases one type of man is needed to plan ahead and an entirely different type to execute the work.* The man in the planning room, whose speciality under scientific management is planning ahead, invariably finds that the work can be done better and more economically by a subdivision of the labour; each act of each mechanic, for example, should be preceded by various preparatory acts done by [management] other men (1911, p.37, emphasis added)

This ongoing acceptance of this dualism, in its general form, has been the ground for a whole variety of management debates and problems. In some ways, it can be said that it dominates the majority of traditional management literature: issues such as strategy implementation, the “*structure – strategy*” debate, cybernetic feedback and filtering, management information scarcity or overload, decision-making collectively or under uncertainty are only a few. Perhaps one way of interpreting most, if not all, of management theory is to see it as an attempt to deal with this dualism and resolve it: how

to link or connect what management thinks (plans, decides) with what the organisation does.

In the 80s and early 90s, the limits of this dualism became apparent. As a result, a number of attempts were made to overcome it in organisational practice. Employees were *empowered* to ‘think for themselves’ (Foy, 1994; Pfeffer, 1994); *organisational culture* became obsessively invoked as the only route to corporate performance (Hofstede, 1997, 2001); *learning organisations* encouraged employees to reflect on their actions and change their behaviour appropriately (Senge, 1990; Argyris, 1992); the importance of *tacit knowledge* as embodied and encultured was emphasised (Nonaka, 1995; Earl, 1995); corporations are urged to identify and focus upon their *core competencies* (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994); and eventually *knowledge* itself became the anticipated central concern of future management (Nonaka, 1994). These appeared to be important steps away from the Taylorist view: all aimed towards a more ‘unified’ view of organisational cognition and action.

It seems, however, that these attempts to reconcile mind and body, thought and action, management and execution have left the original, fundamental dualism intact, succeeding only in moving it to the more subtle level of *individual* action. The concentrated convergence of management interests on the *subject* in the last two decades of the twentieth century (“people are our central asset”), complemented of course by a move away from management’s traditional objects (products, technology, markets, capital, etc. – all aspects of the system of production) marks a complex shift deserving full attention at the deepest conceptual levels.

In the age of *Human Resource Management*, it is the empowered employee/manager who is implored to reflect, think and consider *before, while and after* they act. In other words, although the human subject becomes the site of managerial attention, cognition is still conceived as an essentially distinct domain from action. In social theory cognition is increasingly seen as more tightly connected with action as a “situated” practice (Suchman, 1987; Lave, 1988; Schatzki, et al, 2001). Yet cognition still figures as a separate management concern in the form of knowledge (often invoking the *tacit* element), competence, or emotional intelligence – all of whom have a reality somehow separate from the actions which they constitute a basis for. Even in the celebrated work of Schon (1983) one notes the maintenance of the cognition and action dualism:

[I]n actual reflection-in-action, as we have seen, doing and thinking are complementary. Doing extends thinking in the tests, moves, and probes of experimental action, and reflection feeds on doing and its results. Each feeds the other, and each sets boundaries for the other. (p.280)

Seen in these ways, the split between cognition and action shifts locus but continues to be the legitimating ground for a new set of managerial ideologies. The central feature of current management concern is the human subject who – in its *embodied* presence – is the site where cognition and action should take place and be organised—as knowledge management, reflection, learning, and so forth. On this basis, management intervention should now refer to these processes as its main resources and develop ways of containing and controlling their deployment.

It is our intention here to argue that current managerial concepts—such as learning, planning, knowledge management, decision-making, sense-making, and so forth—continue to face the cognition/action dualism—albeit in a weaker form and with a different

locus—and thus continue to generate a whole set of problems which obscure some of the most fundamental aspects of our ongoing being in the world. We thus raise a very complex philosophical problem which has proved to be immensely difficult for all the major traditions over the centuries. We raise the question of the *unity* of knowing and acting, of thinking and speaking, and essentially that of the thinking, speaking, acting, knowing as simultaneous in the ongoing situated embodied human way of *being*. We want to argue that in the situated and embodied human agent *action is cognition* and *cognition is action*. Any attempt to separate them out as two distinct domains (body and mind)—whether analytically or in organisational practices—generates a whole set of problems that clutter our path to making sense of our everyday ongoing being in the organisation. Of course, we cannot hope to resolve this problem here. Our aim is more modest: to raise it in the current context of thinking about management, work and organisations and to show that underlying philosophical issues cannot be ignored without leaving our very object of interest (human practices) fundamentally flawed.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL SKETCH OF COGNITION AND ACTION

We are thinking. (Martin Heidegger)

The attempt of introspective analysis [of thought] is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or like trying to turn up the gas quickly to see how darkness looks. (William James)

In order to argue in favour of the unity of action and cognition as ongoing moments of being in human experience, we will focus in this paper on a more specific unit of analysis: the already situated *embodied* nature of these processes. The body has been the centre of attention for social theorists over the last three decades in European and North-American thought, but it is not that sense that we will work with the body as a site here. Rather we will make recourse to the work of philosophers – especially that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Michel Henry (1975) – working in the wider existential phenomenological tradition. The historical phenomenon of management’s turn toward the human subject (in the wider neo-liberal context of late twentieth century politics) has been accompanied by practices which focus on the individual as located in a particular body. This seems a simplistic account but it serves to explain our orientation toward the particular tradition we will mobilise here.

Our account aims to weave together ideas informed by the works of Bergson, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Henry, James, and others. We are aware that there are many possible responses to the problem of the unity of cognition and action as an instance, of course, of the more general problem of body and mind. There is also extensive work being done on the general problem of consciousness of which our discussion may form a small part (Ryle, 1949; Dennett, 1993; Searle, 1994; Chalmers, 1996). We want to acknowledge these wide and complex fields of research without directly engaging them as this will detract from our more modest aim.

To make it more precise, our aim here is to provide an existential phenomenological account in a relatively non-technical way which problematises much of mainstream literature on managerial cognition and action. We hope to show that existential phenomenology does indeed provide a radical and useful way to talk about this central

(albeit often ignored) concern for management thought. Furthermore, we hope to show that such an account may provide us with some alternatives to critique some of the mainstream debates surrounding aspects of managerial cognition and organisational change.

Cognition is not something that happens ‘in the head or the mind’, processes such as the formation of ideas, the interpretation of data or the making of decisions – often described as *thought* – are not linear sequences. The relation between cognition and action is not the relation between ‘thought’ *in the mind* and behaviour as a stream of discernible action *in the world*. Action¹ does not presume prior thought in the way that motion presumes the existence of some prior force. Yet, we do tend to speak in this manner. We often say, “I thought it was the right thing to do”, or “after considerable thought I decided to do it”, or “I can not do it now as I still have to think about it”, or even “you must think before you act.” This way of speaking has led us to believe that ‘thought’ is some *independent being or event separate from action*. We tend to attribute to ‘I’ the attribute of ‘thinking’ as a result of the constraints that the ‘subject, object, attribute’ structure of language imposes on us. Once we made ‘thinking’ an attribute of the ‘I’ we proceed to ask questions such as “what is thought” and “how does thought relate to action”. Thus, in an attempt to give an account of ourselves, ‘thought’ becomes an artefact produced in the account by the structure of language. We accordingly proceed through elaborate descriptions and analysis to instantiate ‘thought’ as some attribute that we sometimes have and sometimes not. In *Will to Power* Nietzsche (1967) warns against this ‘habitual’ switch or “double error”:

What are attributes?—We have not regarded change in us as change but as an “in itself” that is foreign to us, that we merely “perceive”: and we have posited it, not as an event but as a being, as a “quality”—and in addition invented an entity to which it adheres; i.e., we have regarded the effect as something that effects, and this we have regarded as a being. But even in this formulation, the concept “effect” is arbitrary: for those changes that take place in us, and that we firmly believe we have not ourselves caused, we merely infer to be effects, in accordance with the conclusion: “every change must have an author”;—but this conclusion is already mythology: it separates that which is effects from the effecting. *If I say “lightning flashes,” I have posited the flash once as an activity and a second time as a subject, and thus added to the event a being that is not one with the event but is rather fixed, is, and does not “become.”—To regard an event as an “effecting,” and this as being, that is the double error, of interpretation, of which we are guilty.* (p.289, our emphasis)

In many ways, Nietzsche’s analysis and formulation confounds much of what we take for granted about everyday processes which seem to make up our lives. However, he draws attention to some of the foundational categorical aspects of our understanding of elementary experience. Lightning does not sometimes flash and sometimes not – the flash is the lightning. Likewise we (as situated bodies) do not sometimes think and sometimes not. Thinking is not an outcome ‘produced’ by the body as something distinct from it in the same way that the lightning does not produce a flash as something distinct from it. *Our situated bodies are always and already thinking* and nothing besides. To be a body is to always already be a thinking body. This notion is rather essential: we (as situated bodies)

¹ In our discussion we will use the term ‘action’ to refer to embodied movement as well as speech. All action has as its location the body in its comportment toward the world. All action consists of embodied movements simultaneously towards and already in the world.

are *always already* thinking. This is an association of categories which aims to convey a phenomenon of unity which is often falsely split by concepts: namely, that we are always and already thinking to the same extent that our consciousness is always and already in existence. In the flow of everyday life there is no interruption to our meaning-seeking existence in the world – to the same extent there is no cessation of thought as a process which is part of our being.

‘Always and already’ appears to be a somewhat odd manner of speaking. It appears both as tautological (‘always’ presupposes ‘already’, it includes it) and as paradoxical: the sense of time being making the past (the ‘already’) somehow co-present with the ‘now’ (as part of ‘always’) and thus co-present with the next, ‘future’ instant. If we assume time to be linear then this clause is indeed illogical and unnecessary. Yet what it aims to convey is that thinking is *historical* in the sense that it draws incessantly on its continuity, that it cannot be easily split in past, present, and future, hence it cannot be addressed in these separate moments in some direct causal fashion (the original thought which determined the next, which determined the next, and so on). Time itself appears more unitary when thought is thoroughly examined as historical. It is hard to separate from what appears to be the present occurrence of a new idea (say, of a new product or technique, etc.) its own historical ground and its meaning as consciousness’ orientation to the future².

Moreover, we also want to invoke the ongoing situated *embodied* nature of thinking: in other words, we want to point out the impossibility of separating thought as an object abstracted from the body for which a *managing body* can easily provide universal categories. ‘Managing body’ here indicates, for example, an institution which tries to capture trans-temporally and trans-personally thinking itself. The best example is the tension continually faced by educational institutions with regards to the *usefulness* (or *relevance*) of their curricula for ‘real’ life. These institutions are trapped by the underlying assumption that thinking indeed can be contained beyond time and person and is thus a transferable, teachable object. Indeed, the evidence that this is not the case is that education is perpetually accused and scrutinised for its incapacity to deliver (the undeliverable). Rather, we argue that thinking is at an elementary level profoundly personal, one with the person’s whole existence, that it is thus linked to existence’s embodied nature, and also to its historical, temporal unfolding.

But this does not mean that we assume an individualistic position. In fact, the historical and embodied condition calls for another fundamental feature of thinking: its *situated being in the world*³. Thinking is what we already do when we talk, walk, touch, feel, decide, and so forth. Cognition is action and action is cognition. Alternatively stated: the mind is the body and the body is the mind.

To help us understand this we can turn to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the relation between thought and speech. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that speech and thought are not distinct domains of being, rather speech is thought and thought

² One area where management theories and models seem particularly impoverished by their own misconception of the historicity of thought is *innovation* understood purely in terms of ‘present – future’ orientation.

³ When using the term ‘world’ we refer to the Heideggerian (1962) use of the term. The ‘world’ is the totality of references that act as the conditions of possibility for a being to be what it is. For example, the business world is the totality of references that are the conditions of possibility for us to be business people (i.e. economic transactions, markets, buyers, sellers, suppliers, banks, money, shops, marketing, etc.).

is speech. He argues that “speech does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it” (p.178). In speech, like in movement, I do not need to visualise external space and my own body in order to move the one in relation to the other. In speech, I do not need to visualise the whole of language as a lexicon in order to subsequently choose words to re-present thought. Rather, thought is the speaking which occurs in the event of the conversation itself. To understand this it may be useful to consider the example of everyday movement in a room. As a skilled actor always already in the world, I find a field of potential action, a horizon of possibilities spread around me, I do not need visualise these possibilities and my own intentions separately from it in order to act intentionally. These possibilities already suggest the very intentionalities that I draw upon and accomplish as I go about moving in the world (Heidegger, 1962). For example: in leaving my office to go to a meeting in another building, I do not need to make a decision to exit my office; I do not need to visualise the door, the handle, and the movements required to open it; I do not need to determine the shortest route to the door; and, finally, I do not need to co-ordinate them into a coherent set of thoughts and actions in order to leave my office on my way to the meeting. As a skilled actor in the world, leaving the room is the obvious next step in-order-to go to the meeting. The layout of the room already suggests the route to the door, the door already suggests the possibility for leaving, the door handle, the possibility for opening it. My hands remember the movements of ‘opening doors’. Thus, I simply get up and walk out.

Likewise, we do not ‘think’ before we greet someone in the morning, or before engaging in an argumentative conversation – the conversation *is* the thought or argument. I know my argument once I have said it – this is a common experience for all of us. We are often surprised by our ‘thoughts’ as we speak them. Thus, in the context of a conversation, that which was already said, the direction of my speaking, the requirements of coherence and continuity, my competence at articulation, and the expressions on the face of my interlocutor, etc., all already suggest the horizon of possibilities for the next sentence, so I simply talk. I step through the conversation in a similar way I move from one building to another. If, on the other hand, the argument had existed prior to articulation how and in what form would we have constructed it? How would we know whether we have translated it correctly from the language of the mind to the language of the tongue⁴?

Thus, speech and action are not the realisation of pre-existing thought but the very accomplishment of it. Merleau-Ponty argues that “what misleads us into this connection, and causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression [action], is thought already constituted and expressed [as prior speech and action], which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusions of an inner life [mind].” (p.183). When I ‘plan’ to do something I have available as part of my already being in the world past actions (or articulations) as the already available possibilities for action (or speech). They are my body – but not in any material sense. Rather, the body is the mind in the world. I, the subject, am never removed from my body and my body is never removed from the world.

Michel Henry argues in *Phenomenology of the Body* (1975) that the world is for the body an always already fully immanent horizon of possibilities. For the body the world is not somehow ‘strange’ and in need of being unravelled. Rather the world is familiar. We see, hear, touch and move with ease, as we also do in speaking, or rather conversing.

⁴ Wittgenstein (1956) argues that it would be impossible for us to have a ‘language of thought’ –what he termed a ‘private’ language—that would be different from the language of talk.

Obviously, sometimes we slip, burn our fingers, say something stupid, or act foolishly. In these moments, familiarity dissipates but soon returns, as a new horizon of possibilities in which the inappropriate acts appear less possible.

Thus, if we consider cognition as the propensity to *act* appropriately in a given situation then cognition – like action and the body – is never removed from the world. By this we mean never removed from the person's situated embodied presence in the world of everyday goings on. If this is true, what about reflection, consideration, judgement and decision-making? Is this not thinking, is this not cognition? In these activities of 'thought' do we not recall something or imagine future possibilities? Maybe, but when we recall or imagine an action we do not recall some *image of* action distinct from action itself. We imagine and recall it as the 'already there' part of my ongoing being *in* the world, and my power of imagining is nothing but the persistence of my world, as my horizon of possibilities, around me. Clearly, it is fundamental how we conceive memory. Here we follow Henri Bergson (1911) in *Matter and Memory*:

Memory is "...a gradually formed experience of an entirely different order, which accumulates within the body...answers ready prepared to an ever growing number of possible solicitations. We become conscious of these mechanisms as they come into play; and this consciousness of a whole past of efforts stored up in the present is indeed also a memory...always bent upon action, seated in the present and looking only to the future. It has retained from the past only the intelligently co-ordinated movements which represent the accumulated efforts of the past; and it recovers those past efforts, not in the memory-images which recall them, but in the definite order and systematic character with which the actual movements take place. In truth, it no longer *represents* our pasts to us, it *acts* it; and if it still deserves the name memory, it is not because it conserves bygone images, but because it prolongs their useful effect into the present moment" (Bergson, p.93)

Moreover, in speaking about thinking as some form of 'recalling' or 'imagining' we must be careful to take specific notice of the issue of time, temporality and historicity in this regard. Time is not a line (or circle for that matter) of discrete moments that passes into 'the past' and is then recalled into 'the present' – like something we store in a drawer and then retrieve at some later date. This discrete spatial notion of time is very misleading⁵. The 'past' and the 'future' re-present the pervading presence of possibilities in every 'now'. The 'past' is only really *my past* as much as it is 'there' in *my present*; otherwise it might as well be some random event of complete irrelevance to me. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues:

The [presumed] cleavage between given [now] and remembered [past], arrived at by way of objective causes, is arbitrary. When we come back to phenomena we find, as a basic layer of experience, *a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning*: not sensations with gaps between them, into which memories may supposed to slip, but the features, the layout of a landscape or a word, in spontaneous accord with the intentions of the moment, as with earlier experience. (p.22, emphasis added)

This is not only true for time but also for space:

⁵ Bergson argues that if time was discrete in this way then a particular moment would not be able to pass since we are always able to further divide the remaining time (akin to Zeno's paradox of Achilles not being able to overtake the tortoise).

In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness, and into which it draws my body. *I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them.* The scope of this inclusion is the measure of that of my existence; but in any case it can never be all-embracing. The space and time which I inhabit are always in their different ways indeterminate horizons which contains other points of views (p.140, emphasis added)

Similarly, the ‘towards’ and the ‘not yet’ of the future are moments of *my existence*, they are already present specific orientations of my own concerns. In my touching the keyboard as I type is present every previous touch, it is the transcendental⁶ condition that gives it meaning, otherwise every touch would be that of the *first* touch—it would be unprecedented. In every sentence and every movement, ‘resides’ all past experiences and the simultaneous anticipation of what is ‘not yet’. The past and the future—in as much as they are *my* past and *my* future—are always already present in every ‘now’. Nevertheless, what does it mean to ‘recall’ something? Surely, we do sometimes experience that we ‘forget’ something and then ‘remember’ it. Yes, this is true. However, we must again attend carefully to what we mean. Let us consider this example: if I drive my car, I attend to my immediate surroundings: the car in front of me, the next junction, my passenger, and so forth. This is my focal awareness. On the edges of my focal awareness is a subsidiary awareness that progressively fades, yet is *present* as the transcendental conditions that make the focal awareness possible in the first place. I can shift my awareness and ‘remember’ where I am going, or ‘remember’ a landmark that I use as a reference point. This shift of focus may be gradual in which case I do not tend to notice that I am ‘remembering’ or it may be sudden—even surprising—in which case I may describe it as ‘remembering’ something. Consciousness, like time, is not discrete events or states. Rather as William James (1996) argues:

My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more...Which part of it properly is in my consciousness, which out? If I name what is out, it already has come in...What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our full self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyse...the whole is somehow felt as one pulse of our life, - not conceived so, but felt so (p. 289).

Thus, I often ‘remember’ not because I can articulate it but because I *feel* it present as ‘there’ even if it does not enter the centre of my awareness. We often experience this when we return to a place we have visited before. There is a felt familiarity that can not be expressed but is very real in the moment. As is clear, this account of remembering is not only valid for the conscious life—i.e. that which I can articulate even if it is with some help—but it is equally true for the preconscious embodied awareness. It would be a serious mistake to limit ongoing situated and embodied thinking—as remembering and imagining—to conscious centre only otherwise we will be confronted with an unbridgeable problem of how to link conscious thinking to our preconscious existence, which constitutes by far the vast majority of everyday action. In fact, it would be better to speak of the preconscious as the outer margins of the subsidiary awareness – as described by James above. Likewise, in this preconscious awareness of my body, I do sometimes ‘forget’. However, ‘remembering’ is not a recalling of some image but rather an ongoing and active involvement in a horizon of already meaningful possibilities. For example: if my hand

⁶ With ‘transcendental’ we mean that which constitutes and thereby renders the empirical possible.

‘forgets’ how to use a tool I do not sit passively and try to recall from some past an image or picture of me using it. On the contrary, I tend to pick it up and fiddle with it. In fiddling with it my hand ‘remembers’ or rather becomes attuned to it again. Yet, the fiddling is not some random collection of actions. The previous using of the tool is present as the transcendental possibilities for making the fiddling meaningful and thereby allowing the possibility of meaningful use to emerge again.

Thus, what we call thinking is often a shift of attention or the fiddling with things or words to allow what is present as ‘past’ to emerge into the focal awareness of getting on with the task at hand. Thinking is thus not before, while, or after in as much as these notions refer to the prior, during or afterwards of discrete linear time and discrete linear events. There is no time at which we are not thinking – to be busy in the world is to think. Thinking is our ongoing historical, embodied and situated activity (or speech) in the flow of everyday organisational life. In as much as we are busy in the world we are already thinking. Equally, the limits of our engagement with the world are also the limits of our thinking.

I can not plan, reflect, consider, judge or decide a world – horizon of possibilities – I am not already in. This is why Wittgenstein (1956) argued that even if I were able to speak to a lion I would not understand a lion because the lion’s language *is* the horizon of possibilities that make up the lion’s world – or more correctly *lion-ing*. As human we are only able to ‘see’ possibilities already present in your ongoing world of ‘being human’. We must therefore conclude that action is not a sign or re-presentation of pre-existing thought as speech is not the sign or re-presentation of pre-existing thought. Merleau-Ponty argues:

“speech is not the ‘sign’ of thought, if by this we understand a phenomenon which heralds another as smoke betrays fire. Speech and thought would admit of this external relation only if they were both thematically given, whereas in fact they are interinvolved, the sense being held within the word, and the word being the external existence of the sense. ... Words cannot be ‘strongholds of thought’, nor can thought seek expression, unless words are in themselves [already] a comprehensible text, and unless speech possesses a power of significance entirely its own. The word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, *and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world*, and, moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body (p.182, emphasis added).

Action makes sense, is intentional, not because it is thought but because it is already meaningful and intentional as the very transcendental condition of my ongoing meaningful activity in the world. Why is it that we can accept movement as the realisation of my embodied being in the world but not speech and purposeful action (plans, reflection, judgement, and the like)? We may readily admit that our body ‘knows’ how to move (and does not need ‘thought’) however we require ‘thought’ before we speak or act purposefully. Is this the Greek ghost in us, which privileges ‘thought’ as a higher good and feels rather disgusted with the profanity of the mere body? Is the delicate touch of a caress not equal in its subtlety and expression to the articulation of a poetic sentence? Why should the one be ‘unthought’ and the other the realisation of profound pre-existing thought?

Now the sceptics may insist and say, “we do think”, we do experience something that we consider to be thought. However when challenged it becomes very difficult for them to give an account of what is done or experienced when thinking happens. The best they can come up with is to say: “We rehearse some articulations (ideas), or attempt some

formulations in our heads, i.e. we speak silently.” To this, we will add to what was argued above that there is no essential difference between speaking silently and speaking out aloud. Thus, silent talk as thinking is still action. Alternatively, they may say: “we recall some past experiences or imagine some future possibilities.” To this we will add as argued above that this ‘recalling’ and ‘imagining’ does not add something new that is not already present in my situated embodied being in the world. Thus, thinking is nothing other than the ongoing realisation, through action, of the possibilities *already there* in our unfolding horizon of possibilities—i.e. our already situated embodied openness to the world. Thus, thinking as recalling and imagining is still action.

The sceptics may agree that it is very difficult indeed to say what is meant when the presence of thought or thinking is claimed. However, they may argue that the existential phenomenological account presented here can equally not directly ‘demonstrate’ that thinking is our historical, embodied and situated activity in the world of everyday life, and they may be right. If thinking is indeed our ongoing historical, embodied and situated activity (or speech) in the world then we can not ‘see’ it as such since any “attempt of introspective analysis [of thought] is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or like trying to turn up the gas quickly to see how darkness looks” (William James, p.117).

We can not think ‘thinking’ in the way that we can not see ‘seeing’ or touch ‘touching’. In thinking—here understood as situated doing and talking—we are never removed from our ongoing embodied openness to the world. As Michel Henry (1975) argues “all intentionalities in general, and consequently, the essential intentionalities of consciousness are known *originally in the immanence of their very being and in their immediate accomplishment...*” (p.16, emphasis added). To insist on an account of thinking is like insisting of an account of seeing. Of course, we can give an account of the biology of the visualisation system. However, we can not give an account of *seeing* because we can not see our ‘seeing’ as such. We can not draw its boundaries or decipher its logic. To draw boundaries and attribute logic is to exclude the very phenomenon we are attempting to circumscribe. We can not say ‘where’ or ‘why’ thinking happens except to say it is always already there when speech and action happens. Is it in the body, in the world or ‘in the ongoing situated relation between’ the body and the world? The distinctions of conscious, sub-conscious and pre-conscious are all rather arbitrary – and possibly of very little use in understanding the unfolding presence of thought/action. Likewise the distinction lived-body/world is probably quite arbitrary. What is a lived situated body without a world – or a world without such a lived situated body? They are each other’s immanent possibilities for being.

This discussion of the unity of thought and action is certainly incomplete. It could not be otherwise. The theme of unity, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, is perhaps one of the most complex areas of conceptual thought. Here we have articulated our analysis on the basis of one possible angle: that of the experiential, or – in our language – the existential phenomenological unity of thought, speech and action. Our aim has been to point out the depth and complex nature of our assumptions about the relationships between these categories in the practice of management.

Of course, our attempt to demonstrate the unity of thought, speech and action is based on a long debate which has occurred between the major thought traditions of philosophy. Although we have not mentioned the profound issues which have shaped the development

of philosophical thought from Aristotle to Descartes, from the latter to Locke, Hume and then Kant and Hegel, our comments are in fact an echo of these systems of philosophical ideas. The space of a paper however does not allow a comprehensive overview of these developments.

Yet our argument does engage a very complex problem: that of grasping the phenomenon of unity with regard to thought and action, to knowing and doing as indistinct aspects of being. In doing so, the argument has had to engage with other issues of relevance both to the pure philosophical concern but also to our concerns as students of management and organisations as human practices. The issues of temporality and historicity as conditions of being human, the problem of the body as site of being and of its situatedness in the world have been examined from the perspective of existential phenomenology drawing on Merleau-Ponty's, Henry's and Heidegger's ideas. In relation to knowing and acting in time, another crucial question which has to be re-opened (in spite of the apparent success of psychological and neuro-psychological research) is that of *memory* and its relation to imagination (or representational thought). In spite of the commonly-held assumption that memory indeed refers to things past, we argue that memory's role is that of 'presencing' the past. In this mysterious aspect of consciousness lies perhaps the secret of our historicity and of our capacity to learn and be creative as persons (i.e. in a unique fashion). We have not developed here however the complex aspect of our being together with other people in the world, that is, the problems raised by our collective processes. Although deserving extensive study in itself, it is important to state here that conceptualising collective phenomena is in itself bound with the conception of thought and action which underlies our view of the person.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Challenging fundamental categories creates an imperative need to answer some of the difficult questions which are thus thrown open again. In the field of management and organisation studies, to advocate the unity of thought, speech and action in the manner explored above makes the attempt to address the field anew extremely complex.

It would be difficult to anticipate all the conceptual consequences which would ensue if we were to take this view and experiment a re-thematisation of management and organisation studies. However, it is possible to consider some of the potential avenues which might be worth exploring.

Returning to the starting point of this paper, we would argue that several key debates in contemporary management literature would come under serious scrutiny in light of this argument. Examples would probably include *strategic thinking*, the problems of *prediction, planning* and *forecasting*, the reliance on *expert systems* and the dominance of *information technologies*, the general questions of *learning, knowledge* and *innovation*, the problem of the *cultural* and *historical situatedness* of human practices – intimately associated with the problem of *human diversity*, and the list could continue. What the reader will probably ask is whether there is any common thread which might link our argument with the general field of management and organisation studies: the answer is that our argument problematises approaches which are ordered by functionalist or structuralist conceptions of cognition, action and the status of the human subject in organised settings.

To the ahistorical, acultural view of the functioning of individuals and collectivities, the present approach aims to counterpose a historical, culturally situated perspective.

However, these problems have been raised by others and there is an increasing literature which takes a similar analytic path regarding aspects of work, management and organisational practice (Suchman, 1987; Lave, 1988; Schatzki, et al, 2001). The distinguishing feature of our approach here lies in its use of the less well understood unit of analysis, the '*body*'. The body has more recently been treated in association with the problem of control as developed by Foucault and his followers. In this paper we treated the body as a problem rather than as one of the objects of more or less problematic management practices. In other words, we used existential phenomenological literature to re-unify conceptions of existence in order to problematise assumptions underlying mainstream modes of thematising the field of management and organisation studies.

An important area of reflection from this perspective is the intensely contested theme of *strategy* and *strategic management*. The growth of corporate strategy discourses after the second world war and their central position in defining management work and in making hierarchical distinctions in corporate organisations is one of the most powerful examples of the reliance of management thinking and research upon the split between cognition and action, thought and execution in the control of production systems. It is interesting to make another historical note here from the standpoint of the present argument: namely that the emphasis on management's strategic role has been contemporary to the growth of *cognitive psychological research* and to other rationalistic approaches to understanding cognition and its relation to action (especially *game theory* as developed by Morgenstern and Von Neumann, 1944 – see Ansoff, 1965, p.105; Whittington, 1993, p.15).

From our own analytical viewpoint, we find crucial the close association of human work processes with the functional development of cybernetic systems (Beer, 1966, 1981) which has allowed the establishment of an almost 'natural' link between human cognition and action and the sequential workings of the 'mind machine'. Since the rise of information processing devices, it has been almost taken for granted that their manner of programmatic functioning is similar and perhaps even closer to optimum than human cognition.

Hence much of the literature dealing with the problem of optimising production systems relied upon a notion of cognition as a linear, incremental process which could be split in phases and operations that can, in turn, be mapped onto the organisational structure and scheduled to suit the production cycle itself. In this cycle, strategy took its privileged place as the manifestation of thinking *par excellence* and it has been served ever since with models, theories, information systems, etc.

On the ground of the "thinking – acting" split gathered momentum an entire set of debates, many just as problematic as the premise itself. Camps are now quite clearly defined in terms of their understanding of the potential for a positive, neat determination of strategy as a function of corporate management. From the relatively straightforward ideas of authors such as Michael Porter, to the more eclectic Tom Peters, to Henry Mintzberg's critical analyses there exists a field called *strategy*. Its very existence is, from our perspective, a manifestation of the apposition of thought and action in the more general terms used in the present analysis. An even more interesting aspect however is the relationship between this apposition and the 'body' as the site where split and reunification take place. The 'body', or the person is the stage upon which the two moments of strategy

take place: on the one hand, strategic thinking has as its condition of possibility the potential for separating thinking and action; on the other hand, strategic implementation relies upon the possibility of re-embodiment of thought in order for it to become action. The notion that between thinking and action there is both distance and unproblematic identity is the keystone for any strategic discourse's claim to coherence. Yet it is precisely this paradoxical relationship between (a) disembodiment of *strategic thinking* from those enacting it and allocating it to a separate function to perform, and (b) the notion that there is also the potential for unproblematic re-embodiment of *strategy in action* which occasions doubt about whether strategising is not anymore than some organisational fantasy whose only reality is a historical document rather than an articulation of thought and action.

As a consequence of long traditions of conceptualising human existence, our message is that management and organisation studies would benefit from revisiting their own fundamental philosophical grounds in order to be able to assess future research directions. The existence of strategy for example is not a 'natural' reality for management studies; in fact, it might be seen as a conceptual problem onto itself. Other aspects of organisational life are equally problematic in their constitution. In other words, our work can benefit from the study of the very premises of our manner of thematising the field of research. Such investigations would necessarily bring us back to fundamental questions about the nature of human practices in their most intimate and mysterious aspects.

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