



# UNDERSTANDING AND LEADING ORGANIZATIONS

## A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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The purpose of this paper is to argue for an ontological investigation into the very nature of organizations and their leadership, in the tradition of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology.<sup>1</sup> Organizations in general, and corporations in particular, play an ever-more prominent role in contemporary society and, given their pervasive influence in all spheres of life, it seems surprising that this has not led to a vibrant ontological inquiry into what they *are* in their very nature. In choosing a guide for engaging in such an ontological inquiry, Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology seems promising, as he made the most prominent contribution to the ontological project in the twentieth century—a time that coincides not only with the rise of corporations, but also with the corporatization of many other aspects of contemporary society.<sup>2</sup>

Real progress in any science takes place when the fundamental assumptions of the very nature of entities to be researched are acknowledged as untenable, and are revised in a more or less radical manner.<sup>3</sup> In such instances—as Michael Inwood<sup>4</sup> points out, with reference to Heidegger<sup>5</sup>—the inquiry, strictly speaking, is no longer scientific but philosophical—or, more precisely, ontological. Ontology is defined as “the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being,”<sup>6</sup> and is also understood to be “the ‘study of beings as such,’ but it can be a ‘regional’ ontology, concerned with the being or nature of e.g. numbers, space, or a work of literature.”<sup>7</sup> In this essay, I want to submit the phenomenon “organization” and, by implication, the field of organizational studies to such an ontological investigation, with the goal of making such a contribution.

An ontological investigation is itself pre-scientific and serves to build a foundation for establishing and developing appropriate theory-generating and scientific approaches, and, consequently, research agendas and research methodologies. Just like any other academic discipline, organizational sciences and studies

necessarily rest on the assumptions about the very nature of the entity with which they are concerned, namely, the organization—whether these assumptions are specifically articulated or not.<sup>8</sup> As Heidegger himself points out, science and ontology are, therefore, inherently inseparable.<sup>9</sup> Any science presupposes an understanding of the very nature of the entity that is being researched, and can only research and understand that which is inherently permissible in its way to ascertain entities.<sup>10</sup> If the fundamental ontological assumptions of the very nature of the organization as the entity that organizational studies is concerned with turn out to be untenable, all the hard work built on these assumptions would turn out to be of limited validity, or even to be misleading.<sup>11</sup>

### Concerns about an Ontology for Organizational Studies

Thomas C. Powell has made a foundational contribution to the academic field of strategic management—and, by implication, organizational studies—by explicitly confronting these fields of investigation with philosophical questioning and inquiry.<sup>12</sup> His arguments against an ontological discourse are not novel from a philosophical perspective. They deserve their prominence in the following argument, however, as they are a rare occurrence in the field of strategic management, in two ways. First, they articulate the implicit, but until then largely unarticulated, empiricist and pragmatist philosophical foundation of the vast majority of the prominent scholarly work in these academic disciplines, especially in the English-speaking world. Second, by doing so, Powell's papers provide the opportunity to engage with this philosophical bias and expose it to further scrutiny and development where this is clearly relevant, even according to Powell himself.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike many other academic fields—for example, the political science or law—which were generated by philosophical insight and are guided by an ongoing, more or less vibrant





philosophical discourse, the academic fields of strategic and organizational management and organizational studies have, for the most part, started out as a result of the pragmatic need to give guidance to the management of a relatively young phenomenon—namely, the modern organization in general, and the corporation in particular.<sup>14</sup>

Powell argues for excluding ontology from strategic and organizational thought, stating that any ontological understanding will inevitably lead to dogmatism, illusion, despair, and escalating chains of ideology.<sup>15</sup> His rejection of ontology presumably stems from equating the entire field of ontology with only a certain type of ontology, namely, what Heidegger calls “medieval ontology,”<sup>16</sup> which is indeed problematic and justifiably raises the concerns that Powell has put forward. Medieval ontology assumes that there is a transcendental truth about the nature of entities that is in some way accessible to certain humans, be they priests, saints, or scientists who claim priestly or saintly status. An ontology that works from the assumption that there is an indubitably knowable transcendental nature of entities, inevitably leads to dogmatism and ideology. As Powell consequently notes: “It is self-serving for scientists to insist, over and above solving human problems, that science transports us into the transcendental realm of reality and objective truth.”<sup>17</sup>

Powell therefore suggests empiricism and pragmatism as appropriate approaches to overcome the limitations of this kind of ontology. In the history of philosophy, both empiricism and pragmatism are responses in an attempt to overcome the limitations of medieval ontological thought. Empiricism was prominently developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, starting with John Locke, who is regarded as the founder of enlightenment. It propagates a view that experience is the only possible source of insight. Pragmatism, as developed by C. S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, among others, is a version of relativism that looks for truth as that which serves to achieve a certain aim, predominantly the betterment of life.<sup>18</sup> It remains undisputed here that experience and goal-oriented solutions should play a prominent role in a discipline such as organizational studies, which is grounded in practice and, therefore, should

also assist in the attainment of certain objectives.

What both empiricists and pragmatists tend to overlook, however, is the way that empiricism and every pragmatic solution implicitly make transcendental claims that can and do lead to the escalating chains of ideology, dogmatism and, consequently, illusion and despair that Powell seeks to avoid. Powell makes the statement that “empiricism is ontologically silent,”<sup>19</sup> and that “empiricism remains silent on what it does not know—the origins of experience.”<sup>20</sup> While it is by definition not part of the empiricist project to make ontological claims, it is an illusion that empiricists operate in an ontologically unprejudiced domain. Scientists, as long as they remain purely scientific, have, by definition, nothing to say in the domain of ontology—although being scientific and every scientific research approach already implicitly assumes a certain nature of the entities about which it attempts to say something.<sup>21</sup> Empiricism, while being ontologically silent in the sense that it is not part of the empirical project to formulate or suggest an ontological ascertainment for certain category of entities, implicitly does make a distinct ontological assumption in assuming that the entities that are researched are of a nature that lend themselves to being appropriately ascertained by empirical methods. As Heidegger explains, within science—and empiricism suggests scientific methods—any entity is implicitly understood in some fundamental way in mathematical and physical terms and, by doing so, implicitly propagates an ontology of substance.<sup>22</sup> If empiricism should lead to any sort of truthful statement, then the entities that are to be researched—in this case, organizations—would necessarily have to be of a nature that makes them accessible in a relevant way via empirical methods, which is to be further investigated below, in particular with regard to organizations.

On the other hand, if the entities in question are not of the very nature that the scientific method implicitly assumes, science can never show such a shortcoming via its own methods.<sup>23</sup> If an entity has aspects that do not show themselves in physical and measurable ways, science will not show them to us via its methods and, worse than that, it will promote the assumption that these aspects are ultimately not

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real, in the first instance. Science therefore can, according to Heidegger, only show us how things already show themselves in our empirical experience, and cannot lead an inquiry into that which is hidden about them.<sup>24</sup> Science can, therefore, only lead to a refinement of knowledge that we already have.<sup>25</sup> It is precisely the insight into what was previously hidden that leads to fundamental breakthroughs in our understanding. As explained above, the capacity of science to lead to fundamental breakthroughs is quite limited, unless it becomes philosophical.

Just like empiricism, pragmatism as a philosophical school of thought is itself not concerned with making ontological statements. Pragmatism overlooks, however, that it has to take for granted certain notions about the nature of human life and the betterment thereof—two types of assumptions that are inherently ontological.<sup>26</sup>

My argument for an ontological discourse regarding the organization is not meant to abandon empirical research or any pragmatic approach, but to complement them and to open up a critical, more primordial domain of investigation.<sup>27</sup> An ontological investigation into what human life or an organization *is* and what, therefore, would constitute the genuine improvement of human life or an organization, would only enhance the pragmatic inquiry. Similarly, empirical research can only benefit from being confronted with the question of whether the assumptions that are implicitly made in any empirical research are really tenable, and will therefore lead to tenable insight.

The question that arises then is what kind of ontological inquiry would appropriately address the types of concerns raised above, such as being dogmatic and leading to escalating chains of ideology. At the same time, this type of ontological inquiry would continuously need to serve in order to examine the implicit or explicit understanding of the very nature of the phenomena under investigation, thus providing critical developmental potential for the field of organizational studies at its most fundamental level.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology as an Appropriate Ontology for Investigating the Very Nature of Organizations**

Heidegger would have agreed with concerns that statements about a transcendental truth are ultimately not verifiable, and with concerns and opposition to an ontology that is grounded in notions of an ascertainable transcendental nature of entities. According to Heidegger, any ontological inquiry cannot hope to arrive at some transcendental truth; it can, however, articulate and interrogate the validity of our implicit or “always already” understanding of the very nature of entities.<sup>28</sup> While we as humans do not have access to an indubitable understanding of the very nature of entities, we do however act, think, and research based on an “always already,” implicit—or, as Heidegger also calls it, “pre-ontological”—understanding of the very nature of entities, mostly without ever reflecting on this understanding. Heidegger terms this kind of ontological inquiry *hermeneutic* phenomenology, because it enquires into the “always already” and mostly utterly taken for granted *interpretation* of phenomena that is implicit in human thought and action.

Heidegger recognizes that hermeneutic phenomenology as a method of doing ontology in itself carries an understanding of what it means to be a human being. Hermeneutic phenomenology assumes that humans, by their very nature, are the kind of entities that live in a referential totality of interpretations, within which they always already understand everything—including themselves—in a certain manner. Heidegger calls this referential totality of interpretations a “world.”<sup>29</sup> The hermeneutic phenomenological term “world” does not refer to all objects in the external environment or universe, as it would be understood in the Cartesian tradition and, by implication, within empiricist thought. “World” is used similarly as one talks about the “world of a mathematician,” the “public world,” or the “corporate world.” “World” in this sense is the always already familiar horizon and totality of interpretations, meanings, and relevance within which everyday human existence moves with absolute confidence, and within which we humans make sense of every situation, action, and entity, including ourselves.

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Any understanding or explanation requires a reference and, as such, the referential whole that is referred to as a “world” allows for the possibility of understanding and explanation itself, in the first instance. Heidegger explains his notion of a “world” as follows:

The world is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, known or unknown things that are at hand. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added by our representation of the sum of things. The world worlds, and is more fully being than the graspable and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being. Where those utterly essential decisions of history are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds.<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, every action and decision of human beings is grounded in the world in which it happens. Because—unlike all other entities—human beings are always in a world, Heidegger therefore calls our way of being, “being-in-the-world.”<sup>31</sup>

An ontological inquiry in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition into the very nature of an entity consequently starts with articulating the “already always” interpretation of the very nature of an entity, which is implicit in the thinking and action with regard to this entity. The ontological inquiry into organizational studies, as the field concerned with understanding and managing organizations, consequently starts with exploring and articulating the “always already” interpretation of the very nature of organizations that is implicit in the way we manage, talk, think and act in dealing with them. One of the most prominent and comprehensive collections and categorizations of the dominant ways of “always already” understanding organizations in theory and practice is Gareth Morgan’s *Images of Organization*.<sup>32</sup> He calls these interpretations of organizations “metaphors”—even though he makes it clear that they have, for the most part, been taken as literal understandings of the very nature of organizations, both in theory and in

practice. Morgan identifies eight such “metaphors” that dominate current organizational thought: organizations as machines, organizations as organisms, organizations as brains, organizations as cultures, organizations as political systems, organizations as psychic prisons, organizations as flux and transformation, and organizations as instruments of domination.

The hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry into these “metaphors” is about interrogating these interpretations of the nature of the organizations and their legitimacy with regard to being either metaphors or a potentially literal ascertainment of either organizations in general, or a particular type of organization.<sup>33</sup> The interpretations of the organization as a machine, organism, or brain are rather obvious metaphors. Organizations could not legitimately be seen as being literal organisms or brains, as they lack a body in the biological sense. The interpretation of the organization as a brain might also include the notion of the organization as a human brain, or even a human being itself. However, an organization—while possibly sharing similarities with human beings, and with humans playing a critical role in organizations—is not a human being itself. Also, organizations cannot literally be machines, as some organizations can, in extreme cases, exist entirely without technology or without almost any physical manifestation—a key characteristic of machines. As such, these ways of interpreting organizations either as physical objects (machines), non-human organisms, or human beings remain metaphorical, rather than being legitimate candidates for developing an ontological understanding of organizations—regardless of the multitude of helpful insights that the applications of these metaphors have generated in the vast literature on organizations. The question thus remains how the status of any of the remaining metaphors of Morgan’s typology could be ascertained as a potentially literal ontological ascertainment of the organization.

To develop an ontological understanding of organizations, it is suggested here that an interrogation of the fundamental types of entities in ontology in general, and in Heidegger’s ontology in particular, is helpful. Besides the fundamental types of entities that have been debated in the ontological and metaphysical dis-





course—physical objects, non-human organisms and human beings—which have been exposed as purely metaphorical understandings of the organization, Heidegger knows a fourth type of entities, which he calls “works.”<sup>34</sup> The word “work” is not used here in the sense of “labor,” but used in the same sense as one talks about a “work of art,” the Latin word *opus*, or the French word *oeuvre*. To be a “work” in the hermeneutic phenomenological sense means to be the kind of entity that is fundamentally characterized as setting up a world for people. While works have physical properties, they cannot be appropriately understood via an analysis of these properties. They can only be understood appropriately as works by attending to the world they set up.<sup>35</sup> In exploring whether an organization can legitimately be understood as a case of a work, the notion of a work needs to be explained further.

Heidegger develops his notion of a “work” in his seminal essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” first and foremost by way of the example of a particular type of work, namely, the work of art. He specifically mentions that there are other types of works, such as poetry, music, art, religion, philosophy, architecture, and states, though he does not mention organizations and institutions specifically in this essay. To explain this notion of the entity called a “work,” Polt uses the example of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington, which was designed by Maya Lin and is usually referred to as “the Wall.”<sup>36</sup> The memorial is a simple V-shaped trench made from a series of black stone sheets, inscribed with the names of all the American soldiers who lost their lives in that war. It has become a sacred site both in and beyond the United States. What makes it a work cannot be found in the material from which it is made, nor in its beauty or aesthetic appeal, but in its effect of causing a world. The Wall sets up a world that makes the Vietnam War present, and establishes and preserves this event as a fundamental dimension of American identity, regardless of the political convictions of the visitors to this work. Such revelations belong to every work.

Works then set up a world and, by doing so, set up the referential whole in which entities can show themselves “as” something, in the first instance, and have meaning at all. Depending on the world in which an entity shows

up, it can have significance in an entirely different way. For example, a rose in bloom is a symbol of love in the world of romance, but in the world of the commercial flower industry, the rose is a source of income, or in the world of perfumery, this rose is a source of a chemical compound. Importantly, for humans, everything shows up “as” something, depending on the particular world in which it shows up.

Works do not just set up a world but also, by setting up a world, set forth what Heidegger calls “earth.” “Earth” in the way that Heidegger uses the term is not to be understood as planet earth or the globe, but as that which is naturally given, or the natural environment (however, not to be understood in the Cartesian sense of a *res extensa*). Earth, in this sense, just like any other entity, only shows up within a world. This natural environment in turn, however, fundamentally influences the foundational interpretations that constitute a world in a similar way as one would think of the natural environment influencing the culture of a community that lives in this very environment. In Heidegger’s thought, there is a constant tension between the way the earth shows up in a world and how the world is influenced by the earth. The interpretation of the earth when honestly confronted always makes it abundantly clear that we will never fully understand what is naturally given, and the interpretations of a world always fall short of fully describing the earth. Genuine works establish this tension between world and earth, and do so by having the earth show up as something that is showing itself as never fully known, never completely understood or ever fully mastered, and thereby in some fundamental way remaining mysterious. An original work performs this setting forth of the earth by relating itself back to this very earth by the materials that are being used in creating a work, which in some way come from this very earth. For example, by using a certain type of stone, a sculptor puts his or her sculpture in a certain relation to the natural environment in which the sculpture is placed. By using indigenous materials for creating a sculpture, for example, the sculpture will link itself back to its environment by repeating it. If the artist creates the sculpture with a material that is alien to the environment where the sculpture is put up, it brings forth the earth as something distinct





from this work of art. In both cases, the earth remains open to question and mysterious, rather than fully explained and obvious.

### The Organization as a Work

My interrogation of Heidegger's fundamental typology of entities suggests that the organization can be legitimately understood as a certain case of a work. Understanding the organization as a work means to understand it as the kind of entity that sets up a world and sets forth the earth. By setting up a world, an organization as being a work is understood to stand in closest relation to the very nature of human beings as being-in-the-world. As mentioned earlier, world is what gives reference and allows for something to show up at all. An organization, by setting up a world, provides a regime of truth—a referential totality in which decisions can be made and justified, and a realm of possibilities for action. Organizations are the kind of entity that, with their various structures, arrangements and set-ups, keep a set of interpretations in place for sustained periods of time. Such structures and arrangements include architecture and workspace layout and design, reporting structures, performance management systems, reward systems, measures, structures of meetings and other conversations, information and communications systems, rituals, recurring events and occasions, prizes and acknowledgements, and symbols such as brands, logos and artifacts. Unlike works of art, which are defined by the materials from which they are made, organizations use a multitude of materials and are usually created around a more or less specific purpose, mission, or vision, and set up a world more or less accordingly.

The notion of the organization as setting up a totality of interpretations that remain relatively stable over long periods of time is in line with Theodore Schatzki's assertion that "to understand an organization as it happens demands not just a grasp of both the unfolding of the organization in objective time and the joining of past, present, and future in activity time, but, in addition, an appreciation of the nexus of material arrangements in which its practices proceed and an understanding of its memory."<sup>37</sup> Memory, in this sense, is not to be understood as the function of a brain, but more

originally as a function of recalling sets of interpretations with which humans make sense of a situation, and therefore have a reference for what constitutes possibilities for thinking and action.

As works, organizations create the possibility for a common history and a common future. They create community, a shared understanding of what it is to be a human being and a shared sense of what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, success or failure, authority and power, and a shared sense of accountability and time.<sup>38</sup> By setting up a world, organizations—like all other works—set up that within which human beings can meet each other as fellow humans and colleagues. Alexander Schwan adds that humans who do not encounter each other within a world do not encounter each other as fellow human beings at all.<sup>39</sup> For humans to encounter, understand, and collaborate with each other as mutually productive fellow human beings, they need to share a certain type of world. When this fails, we say that two people or communities of humans are "worlds apart." Human beings need works to establish communities.

In understanding organizations as works, therefore, Morgan's remaining metaphors gain a different status, as either describing inherent aspects of organizations or particular types of organizations. In changing an organization and consequently changing the world the organization sets up, flux and transformation are appropriate descriptions of the kind of change that can be caused by organizations. In setting up a world, organizations also set up culture and a political reality, which, in a worst case, could be a "psychic prison" or an "instrument of domination."

Sumantra Ghoshal and Peter Moran are helpful here in that they point out that the developers of theory that influence agents in social entities carry a special responsibility, because of a double hermeneutic: by making certain assumptions about what is real, what counts and human nature in the first instance, key actors in setting up and altering organizations do so in a way that promote the very assumptions that tend to lead to self-fulfilling prophecies, and that perpetuate and seemingly validate these very assumptions about the nature of reality.<sup>40</sup> Given that the research and educational approaches that dominate efforts in





management development are predominantly based on science in general, and empirical and pragmatic approaches in particular, it should not come as a surprise that the seemingly most dominant form of organization—namely the “corporation”—is setting up predominantly a world within which everything is revealed in scientific terms. This world is, strictly speaking, no longer a world, but what Heidegger calls *Ge-stell*: an interpretative background within which everything shows up “objectively,” in instrumental terms and in terms of being an asset.<sup>41</sup>

Within this *Ge-stell*, humans are no longer recognizable as being-in-the-world, but become human capital; the earth is no longer the ever-mystical natural environment, but a store of resources to be exploited at minimum cost and effort; and works—including organizations themselves—are a store of financial value, rather than being recognised as the kind of entity that sets up a world within which everything becomes meaningful, in the first instance. Furthermore, corporations have, in many cases, succeeded spectacularly by their own scientific standards. This makes arguing against corporatization, questioning scientific thought and suggesting ontological inquiry within the corporate world show up as wholly absurd. This seemingly self-evident success is leading to the gradual corporatization of all aspects of life in our epoch.

In organization studies and strategic management, as pointed out above, the consequences of this ontological thoughtlessness in destroying the natural and social environment are all too obvious. What is particularly noteworthy here is that, within the corporation and the “scientific world” it sets up, corporations themselves cannot be recognized as works any longer, and therefore management approaches based on science have cut themselves off from understanding the source from which a liberation could come. The source of making a difference here would arise from recognizing that organizational management and leadership cannot, first and foremost, consist in refining the scientific insight into the sources of success and failure in leadership and management, but would need to start with inquiring into the very nature of organizations themselves, and understanding what it means to lead such an entity in the first instance. This

would be the very basis of creating and altering organizations in general, and corporations in particular, to set up a world within which entities can possibly show up in a way that is in harmony with their very own nature.

### What Does it Mean to Lead an Organization?

Having ascertained a possible understanding of the organization as a work, it is clear that scientific approaches to management will ultimately always fall short in essential ways. The question that arises then is how to understand what it means to lead an organization. The notion of the organization as a work opens up a particular avenue for investigating the very nature of organizational leadership as the creation, understanding, and handling of this type of entity.

When understood from the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, organizations produce outcomes by setting up a world in which people inside the organization interpret and understand their circumstances in a certain way, and in which every action and decision in the organization is grounded. The task of organizational leadership is, consequently, first and foremost to understand and skillfully alter the world the organization sets up in a way that calls for people within and outside the organization to perform relevant actions to produce specific required and desired results.

Heidegger fundamentally points out two types of action with regard to dealing with works as works. He calls these types of action “attendance” (German: *Bewahren*) and “creating” (German: *Schaffen*).<sup>42</sup> As mentioned earlier, while works have physical properties, they cannot be appropriately understood via an analysis of these properties. They can only be understood appropriately as works by “attending” to the world they set up.<sup>43</sup> “Attendance” in the Heideggerian sense means understanding the work from being within the world that the work sets up. To “attend” to the work is a way of knowing by participating within its world, rather than just observing the work in a detached way. Attending to the work, in this case, therefore means to be involved in the world that is set up by the work. According to Heidegger, the proper way of attending to and





being involved in the work is solely given by the world that is set up by the work itself:

Attending to the work means standing within the openness of entities that happens in the work. This “standing-within” or attendance, however, is a knowing. Yet knowing does not consist in mere information and notions about something. Those who truly know entities know what they will to do in the midst of them. . . . The attendance to the work, as knowing, is a sober standing-within the awesomeness of the truth that is happening in the work.<sup>44</sup>

The ability to lead appropriately consequently depends on understanding the world as set up by the organization, which can only be attained by attendance to this world—the participation and actual being in this world. A decision about the organization that does not know the world of the organization does, therefore, ultimately not know what it is deciding about. Consequently, authentic leadership is never something that exists independently of and is then applied to an organization.

Leadership cannot be limited just to understanding a particular organization, but also critically needs to engage in the kind of action that actually creates or alters organizations. Heidegger calls the type of action that brings forth or alters a work “creating.”<sup>45</sup> Whether the organizational leader knows it or not, the alteration of any aspect of an organization—such as architecture, set-up of workspace layout, reporting structures and performance management approaches, among others—leads to a repetition, destruction or transformation of the world the organization sets up—even if that repetition, destruction or transformation is not intended. Organizational leadership would only deserve to be called so in the hermeneutic phenomenological sense to the degree that it repeats, destroys or transforms the world that the organization sets up, as all deciding and realizing within an organization is grounded in the world the organization sets up and is directed towards entities as they are revealed in this world.

The very nature of organizational leadership is necessarily derived from the very nature of the entity with which it is concerned—namely, the organization. From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, organizational

leadership consists of the action of attendance and creating with regard to the organization. What is relevant for leaders, first and foremost, therefore is to understand the world that the organization sets up, as well as what is yet possible and not yet possible within this world. To articulate the relation of the organization and the world the organization is setting up to the very nature of the human beings who are in this world is, by definition, a hermeneutic task. To understand a world means to articulate the fundamental interpretations that constitute the world as set up by the organization, and how an existing organization sets up and keeps these interpretations in place. In altering an organization, authentic leaders would have a keen sense of how this alteration is likely to transform the world, and the possibilities that would arise in this new world. Such leadership would simultaneously need to be cognizant of the financial and operational implications of such an alteration—a dimension of skilful creating that could, in reference to Heidegger, be called “managerial craftsmanship.”<sup>46</sup>

Authentic leadership from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective is the type of action that is in co-respondence with the organization as a work and the world that it sets up. The first task of authentic organizational leadership is to articulate the relation of the organization and the world the organization is setting up to the very nature of the human beings who are in this world. It does not make or cause that relation. Authentic leadership, by virtue of leading, brings this relation to the organization and the world it sets up solely as something handed over from the organization and its world. It articulates the organization as a work, and the world it sets up as it is, as it possibly could be and as it is intended to be in the future. Authentic leadership, in this sense, would understand the world the organization is setting up currently. It would, furthermore, understand what is yet and also what is not yet possible in this world, which would contribute to creating the organization in such a way that a new world is skillfully made real. Such leadership is, by its very nature, creative and, as such, a certain type of art rather than a science.







## Keeping the Ontological Inquiry Vibrant

While my suggestion that an organization can legitimately be understood as a work is meant to bring progress to the field of organizational studies, this suggestion is not meant and, remaining in the hermeneutic tradition, cannot mean that this now constitutes a transcendental truth that leaves no room for further inquiry. Rather, the point is to demonstrate the workings and developmental potential of an ontological inquiry in general, and of such an inquiry in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition in particular, regarding organizations and organizational studies. The intention here is also to distinguish clearly metaphorical understandings of the very nature of the organization, from a considered potential literal ontological ascertainment of the very nature of the organization. This is meant, on the one hand, to be a starting point for further ontological questioning and inquiry. On the other hand, it is meant to serve as a possible basis for assessing the appropriateness of existing theory-

generating approaches in organizational studies, and for developing corresponding research agendas and methodologies to investigate organizations.<sup>47</sup>

The concern discussed earlier—of this type of ontological inquiry leading to dogmatism and escalating chains of ideology—would be a risk only if there was an explicit or implicit suggestion not to keep the ontological inquiry vibrant, and consequently to get stuck in a fixed implicit or explicit understanding of the very nature of the entity under investigation. This would have particularly dire consequences if the approach chosen to inquire into organizational issues implies an inappropriate ontological nature, without opening itself up to the ontological investigation as being a constant task, when staying strictly within empiricism and pragmatism themselves. Exposing theory that is built on and implicitly suggests an ontological understanding of the very nature of organization that is untenable will help to keep the whole field of organizational studies relevant, applicable, and constructive.<sup>48</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> EGOS Colloquium in Barcelona in 2009, as a response to the call for papers of Sub-theme 37: “So What Do You Do?” The Art of Practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Organization. Available from: [http://www.egosnet.org/jart/prj3/egosnet/main.jart?rel=en&reserve-mode=active&content-id=1227178922337&subtheme\\_id=1227251866507](http://www.egosnet.org/jart/prj3/egosnet/main.jart?rel=en&reserve-mode=active&content-id=1227178922337&subtheme_id=1227251866507) [accessed 7 January 2009].
2. Hubert Dreyfus and Harrison Hall, eds., *Heidegger: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), and Charles Guignon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992) highlight the contribution of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology in overcoming the Cartesian dualism by locating the being of human being as being-in-the-world, and his foundational influence on thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Richard Rorty.
3. This has most prominently been stated by Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). However, as Hubert Dreyfus points out in *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), this has much in common with Heidegger’s thinking in *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1984), 9, who states further that “The real ‘movement’ of the sciences takes place when their basic concepts undergo a more or less radical revision which is transparent to itself. The level of a science is determined by how far it is *capable* of a crisis in its basic concepts. In such immanent crisis the very relationship between positively investigative inquiry and those things themselves that are under interrogation becomes unstable. Today tendencies to place research on new foundations have cropped up on all sides of the various disciplines.” To what degree this is also the case for organizational studies remains to be seen.
4. Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 192.
5. As Heidegger points out in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, in Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 49–50: “Science is not an original happening of truth, but always the cultivation of a domain of truth already opened, specifically by apprehending and confirming that which shows itself to be possibly and necessarily correct within that field. When and insofar as a science passes beyond correctness and goes on to a truth, which means that it

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- arrives at the essential disclosure of beings as such, it is philosophy.”
6. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 829.
  7. Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, op. cit., 147.
  8. Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), asserts, with reference to Heidegger, that “any science of human beings must work with a prior understanding of human *Being*—and the data provided by the sciences will not, by themselves, clarify this prior understanding. We can pile up volumes of statistical and experimental results about ourselves without coming any closer to grasping what it is to be human” (43). The same is presumably true for organizations.
  9. See also Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, 192.
  10. *Ibid.*, 191.
  11. Dreyfus points this out with regard to the very nature of human beings; however, this argument equally holds in investigating and doing research on organizations (*Being-in-the-World*, 1).
  12. The following argument is based on Powell’s arguments made in three articles published in *Strategic Management Journal*, the most prominent journal in business strategy. His papers are somewhat of an anomaly, as the journal does not publish much outside of empirical, mostly quantitative research, which is representative for the state of the whole field of organizational strategy. See Thomas C. Powell, “Competitive Advantage: Logical and Philosophical Considerations,” *Strategic Management Journal* 22 (2001): 875–88; Thomas C. Powell, “The Philosophy of Strategy,” *ibid.* 23 (2002): 873–80; Thomas C. Powell, “Strategy without Ontology,” *ibid.* 24 (2003): 285–91. The *Strategic Management Journal* plays an overwhelmingly prominent role in current scholarly work in strategic management and, by implication, organizational studies.
  13. Powell, “The Philosophy of Strategy,” 879.
  14. Henry Mintzberg, *Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development* (San Francisco: Brett Kohler Publishers, 2004) points this out in one of the most vocal books suggesting a crisis in current management education and research. Mintzberg is not only one of the most vocal critics of current management education and research, but also one of the foremost contributors to the existing body of organizational research and strategic management.
  15. Powell, “Strategy without Ontology,” 286, 287.
  16. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 3.
  17. Powell, “Strategy without Ontology,” 287.
  18. Some of the most important works in this regard are Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. J. Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955); William James, “How We Know,” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans Green, 1897), 1–4; *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans Green, 1907); and John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, volume 4 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988).
  19. Powell, “Strategy without Ontology,” 286.
  20. *Ibid.*, 288.
  21. Martin Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994).
  22. Martin Heidegger, *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (Tübingen, Germany: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1987), 39.
  23. Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 141–66.
  24. Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 139.
  25. As Heidegger asserts in *Sein und Zeit*: “Since the positive sciences neither ‘can’ nor should wait for the ontological work of philosophy, the progression of science will not happen in the sense of progress but as *repetition* and ontologically more transparent purification of what already has been ontically discovered” (51).
  26. Martin Heidegger, *Über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1949), 43.
  27. Heidegger makes this point in *Sein und Zeit*, 51, that the modern sciences should not wait for the ontological project.
  28. *Ibid.*, §5, 15–19.
  29. *Ibid.*, 63–129.
  30. Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 30–31.
  31. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 52–62.
  32. Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997) is a seminal piece of scholarly work in bringing together and ordering the wide variety of scholarly notions about organizations. Henry Mintzberg, Josef Lampel, and Bruce Ahlstrand in their book *Strategy Safari* (Hertfordshire: Prentice-Hall, 1998), have done a similar piece of work in the area of strategy by ordering the approaches of strategy into ten schools of thought. A comparison of the two books reveals that the ten schools of strategic thought in *Strategy Safari* are, by and large, built on an implicit understanding of the very nature of organizations that is in each case congruent with one of the main notions about the very nature of organizations presented in *Images of Organization*.
  33. Metaphors describe entities as what they are not, rather than as they are. In the case of Morgan’s book, *Images of Organization*, this gives us a noteworthy



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problem, since he suggests only metaphors and no literal description. This could mean a few different things. First, it could mean that corporations are not an entity in their own right at all, but just a figment of the imagination. Second, corporations could be entities that Morgan does not cover at all. This would mean that we need to find out what they actually are, and Morgan's metaphors cannot give us any guidance in this endeavor. Third, there could be an inaccuracy in Morgan's statements, in the sense that one or some of the statements that Morgan presents as metaphors actually are not metaphors but literal descriptions of the corporation. Morgan does not choose any one of these options, but presents a fourth option by stating "Organizations are many things at once!" (347). This is a strange comment. If organizations are many things at once, they presumably would literally be some of the kinds of entities that Morgan describes as 'metaphors'. But then they would not be metaphors, but literal descriptions of what corporations actually are. This would mean that corporations are a perplexing type of entity that has many natures. It seems clear, though, that Morgan is avoiding any ontological statements. This is a position that is in line with the dominant thinking, as expressed by Powell, which seeks to avoid ontological inquiry altogether.

34. Martin Heidegger develops his notion of a work in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*. He makes it clear that there are types of works other than works of art. There are examples of scholarly work that have undertaken the project of developing the notion of other types of works. One such example is Alexander Schwan's *Politische Philosophie im Denken Heideggers* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989), which develops the notion of a state as a work.
35. Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 54.
36. Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 135–36.
37. Theodore R. Schatzki, "On Organizations as They Happen," *Organization Studies* 27 (2006): 1863–73.
38. Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 31, 50.
39. Alexander Schwan, *Politische Philosophie im Denken Heideggers* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989), 19.
40. Sumantra Ghoshal and Peter Moran, "Bad for Practice: A Critique of the Transaction Cost Theory," *Academy of Management Review* 21 (1996): 13–46.
41. The term *Ge-stell* has generally been translated as "enframing," though it might be better to translate it as "set-ting," as within this kind of a "world" everything is "set up" for maximum control and utilisation and is really becoming an 'asset' to be employed for maximum return. See Martin Heidegger, "Die Frage nach der Technik," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Verlag Günther Neske, 1997), 9–40.
42. Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 45–46 and 54–55.
43. *Ibid.*, 54–55.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
46. *Ibid.*, 46.
47. John van Maanen, "Some Notes on the Importance of Writing in Organization Studies," *Harvard Business School Research Colloquium* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 1989), and Robert I. Sutton and Barry M. Staw, "What Theory is Not," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 40 (1995): 371–84, have made valuable contributions in this regard, and this indicates that such approaches and methodologies do exist. It seems, though, that they are far from finding widespread acceptance in the mainstream of scholarly work on organizations and strategic management.
48. Sumantra Ghoshal, "Bad Management Theories are Destroying Good Management Practice", *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 4 (2005): 75–91, points out that such theory can lead to ethically highly problematic practices.

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