

**A Perspective on Management Research: Based on a reading of
Heidegger's text "Being and Time"**

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Abstract

This paper describes management research from a Heideggerian perspective (*a perspective formed through an interpretation of Martin Heidegger's text Being and Time*). In particular the emphasis is placed on how management research is conceived from this perspective, and why this conception can facilitate the development of research. Drawing on decision making as a fundamental management activity, I attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of the Heideggerian perspective in seeing management (the discipline). This demonstration shows how decision-making is more than merely rational behaviour and that one must resort to the being of the researcher, in order to develop a deeper sense of behaviour. Thus, we get an instance that demonstrates the Heideggerian perspective, as a structure for understanding management, or indeed other disciplines.

Keywords: Heidegger, Being, Ontology, Ontico, Perspective

Introduction

At the outset I must stress that this paper is not based on my interpretation of the whole of Heidegger's text *Being and Time*, but that it is primarily informed by the first chapter, which is about exposing the question of the meaning of being. Nonetheless, I have found original insight in Heidegger's thought, which I feel can provide a perspective on how to develop the field of management research. A field which at the moment lies in some degree of confusion.

Management: Philosophical Overview

At the moment Management is a fragmented field (and by management I refer here to the collection of European and North American theories about managing people in Organizations). Despite numerous research projects, the field lacks coherence in terms of what to examine and how to do it (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000; Johnson and Duberley, 2000).

One level at which the perspectives used in these investigations seem most obvious is the philosophical level. It is at this level that we begin our inquiry. At the philosophical level we find that some groups claim to be critical realists, some groups claim to be postmodernists, and then there are others who label themselves constructivists, and so on and so forth, you get many disparate

perspectives. Sometimes these groups end up studying the same topic. And when this happens, great confusion and frustration can boil to the surface.

For instance, consider two researchers attending a meeting on the topic Leadership learning in the Non Government Organizations. They casually bump into each other over a cup of tea.

Dr Marx: Hello

Dr Herbert: Hello there.

Dr Marx: Well old man. What do you make of this Leadership topic? I for one think it's rather pointless unless we can develop some practices that can benefit our fellow man.

Dr Herbert: Indeed, our fellow man, the manager of self and others if you will, is a rather complicated fellow. A rather moody fellow, one who strangely seems to obey no apparent laws! Perhaps we can turn to the imagination and conceive of how he or she can lead this thing they call an NGO towards its rather shifting goal posts.

Dr Marx: Why, don't be ridiculous my dear fellow. What value is there in that? What exchange value or rather use value is there in some idea, unless it be the material fabric of how this NGO is to develop? We need a revolution that orders our material forces into a sustainable state, one which speaks for the labourer's betterment. Our reason is surely to be found in such equity.

Dr Herbert: And what if we need to imagine how it should be. How ideas could possibly inspire the development of some material gain. Development is not necessarily economic or social, and it is often rather in the mind. What man settles for, he simply often does because it is to his satisfaction, and not to any social betterment or detriment.

Dr Marx: Why this is an outrage! What value is your idea if it has no service to offer mankind? What exactly do you think this NGO is?

Dr Herbert: What do you think it is Dr Marx?

Dr Marx: Surely it is how you are, how you act. How you determine, and how you are determined. It is how you sit and move about in actual history, historicity of material reality. One, that you can know as an NGO, only as observable and only as that which can be thought of as such. Something that can be measured as an output of the collective enslavement of our poor dependant fellow man.

This NGO and the leaders within it are surely objects of science, not science Fiction!

Dr Herbert: And what if they are not to be thought of as just that? Would this not provide more flexibility to our thoughts? Would this not arouse our passions and intellect, where one can conceive as one feels about leading others, abstract of the rules and confinements of this material reality?

Dr Marx: Enjoy your tea, you Nutter; this is absolutely absurd. Clearly we are not talking of the same things here.

This delightful conversation demonstrates some of the difficulties that surface when you for instance put a postmodernist in the same room as a modernist. Tempers erupt, and confusion arises, and this

happens seemingly because the two see different realities. And so often they have different ideas about how one can know this reality (Kuhn, 1996).

So what? You may ask. Well, for one thing our example demonstrates the problem that comes from a lack of coherence in the field of management. The optimists in the field gladly accept this as collateral damage. Some of them would look at this situation and argue that it is an opportunity through which the field of management can develop. That is, having several perspectives on what is studied is a great gift of the imagination.

With this I do not disagree. And as a flexible researcher one can see the obvious benefits of letting the imagination run a little wild. And perhaps, this is a necessary stage through which management must cross as a discipline, so that it can evolve into a mature and more coherent whole. However, this perspective does not come without weaknesses.

There is no harm in having several ideas about how one can study a thing. Or having several tools that one wants to employ in collecting evidence, doing analysis, and drawing conclusions. But there is indeed a great difficulty in the optimistic view. Ask yourself is it quite acceptable to have ideas in relation to a thing, which is not understood by those involved in its inquiry, as pretty much the same occurrence? Surely, having many ideas about something is alright so long as those investigating it can reach some agreement on what it is, or how it is to be seen. This difficulty, the major pitfall, is demonstrated in the conversation above.

Without some agreement at the ontological level, management research will encounter great difficulty. And moreover this is what lies at the heart of the lack of coherence in Management research. But these difficulties are not necessarily a bad thing. They do on the other hand consume research resources! If one is to move towards some degree of coherence, these issues should be resolved.

To this end, I propose a perspective that is based on my reading of Heidegger's somewhat ambiguous book "*Being and Time*". First, I will discuss the general feature of this perspective in relation to the ideas presented by Heidegger. And then I will demonstrate how management decision making, which is a key activity employed in managing organizations, is an instance, which as an **object** in management research, can be conceived in the Heideggerian perspective. This shows how within the proposed perspective, management decision making appears as more than just a

rational activity. The paper concludes with ideas about the implications of the formulated perspective.

The starting point?

Let us provisionally suppose that Being is pre-conceptual. This means that it is a kind of a familiarity pronounced when we say *this is or that is* some thing. This familiarity transforms through a systemization of *this is*, which leads to a conceptual moment, a moment constituted by the culturing and rationalization of this familiarity. So *this is* then become *this is a cat*. Such moments vary from culture to culture, but there is always some logic discernable. There is some pattern of interconnectedness constituting such moments, demonstrated in the inquirers interpretation, and more fundamentally, existing as it is a familiar thing.

Such moments are outward extensions of a familiarity, embodied in how one behaves in systematically interpreting what is this or that thing. So for instance asking the question of the meaning of management is a pattern of interconnected moments. With and through the inquirer's being with which we are always in a familiarity, what is disclosed is partially what *is*, as well as its extension into conceptual moments. Let us next see how this fits into the ideas presented in Being and Time by Heidegger.

Heidegger's perspective.

Instead of taking management as subject matter, Heidegger (1978) deals with the question inquiring the meaning of being, and how this relates to the inquirer as an entity with his own being, and the implications this has for what is sought after by the inquiry. Although he does not deal directly with management, he does provide a way of perceiving management, as something with an Ontological priority, as primary over an Ontical priority. The ontological priority is explained as that effort by the inquirer which looks at his ownmost being, so that this is a basic being with no particular directions or intentionality. It is the condition prior to the development of Ontology's that are used to make sense of entities towards which the individual comports himself. By contrast the Ontical is about entities and facts about them. For instance, the inquirer is an entity, and in asking about a thing, he comports himself as such towards entities, but he is also always a Dasein. This term Dasein indicates the purely theoretical concept of always in some way having an understanding of one's being.

Reformulating Management (the research field)

From this perspective, management is a subject matter, that has certain objects of study, and underlying these objects there is the area constituted by the domain of those entities which are the inquirers, who themselves as entities have a basic being at the Ontological level. The basic concepts used in *understanding* this area, are demonstrated in pre-scientific ways, where the inquirer as an entity interprets the area beforehand, with regard to his basic state of being. So what is primary is the interpretation of the inquirer as it actually happened. This is the ontological terrain, where interpretation takes place, with regard to the inquirers being in his genuine history (historicity).

Provisional Being

To introduce some transparency to the inquiry, in formulating the question of the meaning of being, we must provisionally presuppose a being that can be used to articulate some being to those entities that we encounter. Here this presupposed being is not the one sought after by the inquiry. It is rather an understood point of reference. Heidegger goes on to say that the answer to the inquiry is not reached through some deductive logic that for instance takes us from some axioms (such as the presupposed being), through towards the formulated question of the meaning of being. But rather that the answer is exhibited in the grounds that one lays bare. That is, it is reached by what Heidegger calls a *non-deductive genealogy*.

This provisional being comes from an awareness of being in which we always operate. This is the given being possessing as its character those priori conditions that give rise to the ontology's for working out the different ways of being of the entities that are studied as such and such. These conditions are necessary for later on answering the question of the meaning of being as they give to us this presupposed being. Here, Heidegger is concerned with the being of the researcher, who comports himself in his being, towards that being, and therefore has a relationship towards the object of inquiry (being), that is one of being. This being is always in some way explicit argues Heidegger. So to find this being, a provisional being is initially taken from the basic understanding that all of us exercise in when we come to inquire anything. Sartre (2003) explains this as the fundamental character of existence, one that is a consciousness of the self. This will later become clearer as we look at the subject matter of management, as itself an entity, and give examples.

Back to the starting Point!

Now, there are several concepts above. Let us see how they relate to the starting point. This will help unfold the perspective suggested in this paper.

In the first place there is Ontology of an entity, which is concerned with the ways of being of any entity. *Being is always the being of an entity (Heidegger 1979 .p29)*. Therefore any way of being is always that of an entity. Now a priori to such ways of being, which is to be exhibited in a non-deductive genealogy, there must be a general understanding of being (the provisional being of the inquirer). Here this is then an Ontology with no particular direction or tendency, but rather a neutrality. This as mentioned is for instance the Ontological priority of the question of being of management as asked by a researcher!

Next, look at what was introduced earlier as the notion *familiarity*. This notion was explained as pre-conceptual. This can be thought of as a region of the ownmost or basic being in which Dasein always operates and the interpretation that demonstrates the basic concepts in working out any area underlying the objects (for instance, Efficiency, administration, Learning, and decision making) of some subject matter such as management.

Heidegger (1978) claims that we operate in an understanding of this ownmost basic being, when we claim that *something is* the case. Thus, familiarity as *what is* this or that, constitutes this understanding. This understanding is then stretched into what we have seen as a conceptual moment, which shapes the basic concepts used to interpret the area in which the objects of a subject matter are investigated. Thus, conceptual moments function to systemize the familiarity, and themselves they are not the basic concepts. Instead they are the processes in which these basic concepts are formed, when one points at something and says *that is a cat*.

Now this is the crucial point! Understanding is familiarity in so far as at some level it is an understanding or what Sartre (2003) calls, consciousness of self! Familiarity is therefore that region which is constituted by the basic being as well as the working out of any area, where we always have an understanding of being, but additionally this is pre-conceptual, and yet there is space constituting the rest of understanding outside of it. Just as we see our manager walk from around the corner, we are able to recognize him. He appears from this space through what starts to be familiar, and then what is labelled rationally as “the manager”, who fits in the system illustrated as the organizational hierarchy. (Note: What is implied here is space as non-consciousness. But this is not discussed in detail as it falls outside the scope as well as word limit of this paper). Rationalization is one example of systemization of this familiarity.

The thesis of this paper is that through our interactions in daily life, as we walk about tending to our affairs, talking to people, seeing things, doing things, we can use the explained structure as an illustration of the transformation of our understanding, into all inquiries that take place in the subject matter management. To demonstrate implications, let us look at Management, and the object of study within it, called Decision Making.

Decision Making: the Role of Language

Briefly note that Decision making as an object of study is not necessarily objectified or subjective. This is not a concern here. To demonstrate the suggested perspective, decision making has been chosen for three reasons. First, it is my area of research, so I have some *understanding* of it. Secondly, it is an area where the development of theories is engined by a system of rationale that is strongly exhibited at the Ontological level, as well as the Ontical level, where we will see the significant role of language as a way of interaction. Thirdly, some academics suggest that Decision Making is the most fundamental type of behaviour exhibited by individuals in organizations (March and March and Simon, 1966; Cooke and Slack, 1984).

Expected Utility theory is a fundamental theory of decision making. It has influenced the development of ideas in decision theory both in its prescriptive and the descriptive areas. Now at some level in working out this theory, there sits the understanding of being and a familiarity. As an object of study, this theory grows in the area that is composed through an interpretation of the inquirer, who employs basic concepts through conceptual moments.

Now these concepts have in the case of Expected Utility theory, been formed at the ontological level, prior to the explicit development of the theory. Expected Utility Theory is largely one that is written in mathematical notations organized using inferential rules. So it is a formal system. Now, the authors of theory had a familiarity, a way of comporting themselves towards their ownmost being, which they carried along in developing this theory. Such familiarity sits in the understanding from where the basic concepts constituting this theory are shaped through conceptual moments. Now it is important to be clear that expected utility theory formed at the ontological level is not tantamount to saying that Expected Utility theory has an Ontology. The Ontological level as expressed before is here the pre-ontology the conditions of which characterize the ownmost basic being, one towards which without any particular intentionality the inquirer is always comported.

Now assume that the patterns of interconnectedness that constitute the area (e.g. life) underlying the subject matter management, which form when the inquirer interprets this or that using basic concepts, are shaped by language. Then such basic concepts are formed by speaking, doing, and observing. In the case of Expected Utility theory, we cannot claim that such basic concepts were formed when the author went to school or university, or through some professional training. For these things would have been the constituent's of the different Ontology's underlying this or that theory they came across or in some theory through which they remained conscious, theories that would be basic in some sense. But what we can ascertain is that pre-ontology, their familiarity is conditioned, so as to predispose them to think in a certain system. In the current case this system that conditioned the development of basic concepts are not the assumptions underlying Expected utility theory, but instead it is the precision of a sort of thinking (in this case analytical). That is, in writing the expected utility theory, when we use notations such as $(1/2 * \$50 = 25\$)$, what we will take as primary and therefore ontological is not the number, the operator, or any such notation. But what is basic and displayed as the patterns of conceptual moments, is the character of the logic underlying these notations.

This character is such that it systematically extends out familiarity, and grows the basic concepts and their interconnectedness, so as to avoid the employment of other systems that may tap into the rest of the space that behaves to provide some understanding of being. This character is not for instance propositional logic, where we have connectives and syntax and certain rules used to form other rules in developing the language of mathematics. Rather simply, the formation of basic concepts as the inquirer interprets this or that event, is a tendency, that happens to lead to concepts that are basic to this or that ontology, but they are above all of a certain precision. In the case of expected utility theory they are of an analytical precision.

This implies that to speak of basic concepts as underlying the area where objects of any science are examined, is misleading. Rather, we need to see such basic concepts as the front end of processes that are conceptual moments, extending out the familiarity through a certain system. This is conditioned to some degree by language employed in this or that theory, or some daily life interaction.

Implications

Foremost, the perspective explained in this paper is a structure, which can be used to think about management or indeed any other science. In a sense, the direction in which it takes us, disposes us

to look at disciplines and theories, as rooted in the fundamental sense making of the inquirer, his familiarity.

At the same time, a relationship between theoretical development in a field and the language of the inquirer is implied. In the case of Expected Utility theory, this has meant that certain types of problems have occurred in the field, which only provide evidence of this relationship. There has been a crisis in the basic concepts in decision theory, which has led to the emergence of questions as regards to the usefulness and applicability of the theories associated with Expected Utility theory (Simon, ; March,). A strong example is the emergence of the notion that individuals do not always behave as Expected utility theory tells us that they should, and that as such, there are important considerations besides rational thinking, which this theory omits.

At the ontological level, relating to the Dialogue presented earlier between two academics at a NGO conference, we can also see the usefulness of the Heideggerian perspective. Using this perspective we can see that it is at the level of ontology of the given entities, the individuals themselves, or what they discuss, that there remains some conflict. One being a Materialist, and the other for instance a relativist; we can see that they have different conceptions of what an NGO is. That is, they employ certain ontology's in seeing the entity NGO as this or that thing. But prior to this, at a still implicit level, we can see that there may indeed be some unifying character displayed in how they become familiar with anything through conceptual moments, employed in understand the area (e.g. life) that underlies the subject matter or entity NGO, taken as having this or that object ready for discussion.

The interpretation of these entities studying other entities (NGO's), can according to Heidegger be Non –deductively exhibited. This only further strengthens the view, that most language is deductive, and so in some way, it is language, employed in forming this or that theory, which has led to the outstretching of our understanding of being, as that extension of familiarity which forms conceptual moments. To be a critical realist, or materialist, or any such believer, it is at this level of extended familiarity, that one has assumptions. And so there is something underlying such Ontologies of several schools of thought in management, something that is more primary, something that is displayed in the tendencies of being, conditioned by language! And behaving as such and such in comporting oneself towards an entity such as management, or some entity within management as a subject area.

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