

**A research method for the future:  
Husserl's phenomenological method in management**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

There is a palpable need for a new theory that embraces organisations and management – the hegemony of scientific theories is at an end. This paper argues that the phenomenological method which Husserl inaugurates has the potential to provide new insights. Those who adopt a phenomenological attitude to their situation within a business can explore unusual, and as yet unseen, depths within phenomena. The paper describes Husserl's method which requires the development of skills and a thoroughgoing rejection of scientific methods of enquiry. However, this method is unlikely assist practitioners to achieve already determined business goals.

Keywords: philosophy of management, leadership, organisations, philosophy, wisdom, research methods, phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger

#### **THE PHILOSOPHY OF MANAGEMENT & THE FUTURE**

Practical managers, and those who write theory, struggle with the nature of intelligent action by organisations. Uncertainty appears ever greater both in the practical and theoretical domains – the mysterious future provokes us. What is involved when an organisation implements good decisions and advances itself into a better future? What occurs in such organisations? A recent study of family businesses, for example, urges us to pose such questions, and identifies the need for a new kind of research – an innovative methodology – that captures the “complexity and dynamics” of the business situation (Nordqvist, Hall, & Melin, 2009, p.294). In the last decade, management theorists have increasingly turned away from positivist science in their bid to understand management. Mintzberg argues for more profound insights than those which may be achieved by a narrow reliance on science, and he identifies 1946 as the year when the “precipitating event” occurred which turned on the light to systematic research, research “rooted in a set of underlying disciplines, notably economics, psychology, and mathematics” (Mintzberg, 2004, p.25 & p.25). An alternative approach to that which Mintzberg advocates in his bid to overcome science is to adopt the philosophy of

management as a foundational discipline for management and hence to draw upon philosophical methods of enquiry.

Within the philosophy of management people ask about the relevance to management of theorists from diverse philosophical traditions. It is convenient in the philosophy of management to adopt the same broad characterisation of modern investigations that many adopt for the discipline of philosophy itself. Although the classification is crude and disputed, there are conceptual (analytic) studies and there are studies which draw upon the traditions of continental philosophy. It is to these traditions that people turn in their search for an innovative methodology for enquiries into management and business.

If we are to select one name as indispensable to the twentieth century analytic “movement” it must be Ludwig Wittgenstein, who in two contrasting works advances our understanding of concepts, language and reasoning (1922; 1953). In the early 1930s he indicates his intellectual break with science (he was an engineer) when he writes in his notebook that we should pursue descriptions and not explanations (Wittgenstein, 1931). The limitations of analytic philosophy are made plain by an author who has done much to popularise the discipline. Simon Blackburn writes: “Analysis tells us what is meant by statements made in on form of words, in terms of statements made in other words. Its credentials as an intellectual tool have themselves been the topic of a great deal of philosophical controversy, and its status has varied over the last hundred years” (Blackburn, 1999, p.66). As we shall soon see, this impediment is apparent in the work of some who bring analytic techniques into the study of management.

Serious work directed at the problematics of management appears in the analytic tradition. For example, a leading concept involved in new enquiry is the ancient Greek notion of “wisdom”. Evidently, the old dog wisdom suffered a gradual decline as a player in management theory from the time of the Scientific Revolution, although it is now poised to

make a comeback (McKenna, Rooney, & Bos, 2007, p.83; Rooney & McKenna, 2007). We read that “wisdom becomes increasingly important” for dealing with the challenges of current diverse business contexts, the realities of leadership, increasing complexity and uncertainty, societal dynamics, value-shifts, globalisation, increased competition, technological developments, innovation, change processes, transformational endeavours such as down-sizing, and outsourcing (Küpers, 2007, p.170). ‘Wisdom’ is at issue in multi-cultural enquires such as that which finds that the leadership of chief executives in New Zealand corporations is a “monocultural construct framed by the exogenous models of leadership that have developed from the research conducted in North America and Europe”, and thus the construct excludes indigenous people (McNally, 2009, p.iii; Taurima & Cash, 2000).

The philosophy of management has yet to produce a definitive study in the continental tradition of philosophy. However, authors see the possibility and circle around it. For example, we may expect that the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), arguably one of the two or three major figures of twentieth century philosophy, has something to say that is relevant to the discipline of management. Although Heidegger was a dramatically unsuccessful manager himself, his theoretical work is found relevant to the issues that confront managers today (Shaw, 2008). More generally, a symposium considered what it means to “manage phenomenologically” as an enquiry into an aspect of management technology. Recognising the foundational nature of phenomenology, Hummel (1990, p.5) says “the time has come to enable managers to cut through the maze of scientific management and to speak out loud to those fundamental practices in the hands-on-management of things without which nobody can proceed to judgments as to when and how to apply management technology”.

Leadership and wisdom are characteristics we associate with people. When it is said that organisations show leadership or wisdom we take a liberty with the concepts, and everyone understands that people are involved. Equally, we understand that when managers show

leadership they do so within a context, and there is no detached example of leadership that does not involve a business environment and other people. Thus, in each instance when the word “leadership” appears we refer to a world that includes people, which is an aspect (more strictly, an aspect of one concept) of what Heidegger means when he says the human being is always ‘worlded’ (always integrally with a world). The human being is always a being with direction towards some situation; you will find yourself always doing something, always with an orientation. To capture this notion Heidegger uses such expressions as “Being-towards-others, Being-towards-death, Being-towards-entities within the world” (Heidegger, 1962, p.23). An enquiry into worlding is distinctly a Heideggerian phenomenological enquiry; it is an ‘ontological’ enquiry, which is to say one founded upon the notion that we are never in worlds (environments) that are separate from ourselves. The distinction between that which is managed and the manager is no longer valid. This conclusion has the potential to enlighten new research into management. Whether it has the potential to improve current practice is a challenging question in the more distant future.

There are recent investigations into business strategy and organisational issues that take such a stance and appropriate Heidegger’s method (for example, Heil, 2008). Ehrich also suggests that phenomenology may contribute to the discipline and practice of management. It is possible to take issue with her assertion that the methodologies of the early phenomenologists were not intended for applied research (Ehrich, 2005, p.2). Phenomenology studies situations that exist and must always begin with ourselves. An academic researcher cannot do the phenomenological research of a management practitioner. Nor can an academic researcher advise a practitioner on how to achieve particular objectives or goals more readily by the deployment of a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology is most unlike engineering where you may apply known principles and techniques to build the bridge. That does not mean that phenomenology has no use in relation to the building of bridges. Nor does it mean that the “early phenomenologists”, let us specify Husserl, did not discern the value of phenomenology in practical activities. Indeed, Husserl wrote his celebrated (difficult and

controversial) encyclopedia article in part with the intention of allowing the use of his method in practical (or as Ehrlich would say “applied”) disciplines.

In summary, the philosophy of management in two traditions – the analytic tradition and the continental tradition – asserts its relevance to management. With regard to the continental tradition, the methodological foundation of enquires is at issue. The present author finds that those who have thus far *applied* phenomenology to management have not aligned themselves well with the theory of phenomenology. The genuine theory of phenomenology must be in play if we are to avoid the generation of myths and that is why the present paper is directed specifically at Husserl’s method.

### **THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD**

Phenomenology provides a practical means to explore management. The task of this section is to introduce phenomenology as a method of enquiry. To see the inalienable quintessence of management we need to immerse ourselves in management as it appears in itself.

Phenomenology depends on a personal involvement with the phenomena. We must be brought face-to-face with the experience of management, to undergo an experience of management, which here means specifically that management involves us in an experience which is not of our making – management must befall us, strike us, come over us, overwhelm and transform us (compare Heidegger, 1971, p.57). Only personal experience can provide access to management in itself. The task is to look afresh at management and thereby to gain a more profound understanding of its occurrence than that achieved by the theorists such as those who pursue concepts such as ‘wisdom’.

What is phenomenology? The account given here is deliberately that of Husserl, with some support from Heidegger. The word – meaning “the science of the ways in which knowledge appears” – is found in *The Phenomenology of Mind* which was first published in 1807 (Hegel, 1931, p.476, Vol. 2). The modern methodological sense of the word “phenomenology” is the

legacy of Edmond Husserl (1859-1938) who seeks to ground our knowledge of the world in our lived experience, without in the process reducing the content of that knowledge to the contingent and subjective features of that experience. We must cease our habit of seeing management as the accumulation of strategy, budgets, employment positions, communications, and financial results. In an early work, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1931), Husserl establishes a path of enquiry which is now influential in many diverse disciplines and practices such as nursing, psychiatry, religion, teaching, theatre, physics, biology, and indeed any categorization of lived human experience (Ihde & Zaner, 1977; van Manen, 1990; Zaner & Ihde, 1973). The present paper will succeed if ultimately it extends this list to include management.

Phenomenology is a distinctive way of making sense of phenomena. Thus, at issue is the nature of phenomena and our human capacity to understand what comes to us through our own lived experience. Three cardinal and inevitably interwoven tenants of phenomenology relate to how one begins to enquire into experience. They are: (1) attend to phenomena as they appear in themselves, which means (2) set aside the categories of things to which we normally attend (objects, things), and (3) seek out the structural invariant features of phenomena, which is to say in the language of phenomenology, essences. Elaboration of these three tenants follows.

It requires practice to see an essence – those who would enquire with the skills of the phenomenologist must both understand and practice pertinent techniques. You would not expect to understand a great work of art or theoretical physics without a period of reflection and likewise the insights of phenomenology mature. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a major theorist in this discipline, records his initial acquisition of skills – he calls it the achievement of “the phenomenological attitude” – from Husserl whose “teaching took place in the form of a step-by-step training in phenomenological ‘seeing’” (Heidegger, 2002, pp.79, & p.78). Notwithstanding the challenge of learning techniques, management practitioners will be

encouraged by phenomenology's concern with the practical world of the workplace. The notion that phenomenology enquires into lived day-by-day human experience is prominent in the work of Canadian theorist Max van Manen – "Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld – the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize or reflect on it" (van Manen, 1990, p.9). This promises a way to address the complexity and flux of management that is the common experience of those emerged in events.

### **1. See primordial phenomena**

If we adopt Husserl's step-by-step approach to phenomenological seeing, the first step is to clarify the nature of phenomena and to thereby appreciate Husserl's prodigious insight into phenomena. The difficulty with bringing this insight into practice is that our habits of thought mediate against us, and in the second "step" we try systematically to eliminate those habits of thought that corrupt our pure grasp of the essential of phenomena.

The task of fundamental research – phenomenology – is to encounter phenomena from a very specific privileged position. Husserl identifies this stance in his petition that we return to the "things themselves" (Husserl, 1970, p.9; Husserl, 1999, p.9). We must found our enquiries upon our own direct experience of phenomena – we are to enquire into our primary or immediate experiences of management and set aside all thinking about management.

Experience is always an experience of a human body and in an enquiry into management we must first attend to the place of the body. We must personally be amongst management and involved with management. Perception, which always involves the body, is one part of experience, and of this Husserl says: "The Body is, in the first place the medium of all perception; it is the organ of perception and is necessarily involved in all perception. In seeing, the eyes are directed upon the seen and run over its edges, surfaces" (Husserl, 1999, p.163). He observes that when we perceive, we always pursue something, or orient ourselves towards something (are "motivated" to move our bodies):

To the possibility of experience there pertains, however, the spontaneity of the courses of presenting acts of sensation, which are accompanied by [a] series of kinaesthetic sensations and are dependent on them as motivated: given with the localization of the kinaesthetic series in the relevant moving member of the Body is the fact that in all perception and perceptual exhibition (experience) the Body is involved as freely moved sense organ ... (Husserl, 1999, pp.163-164)

Husserl returns us to the basics of our existence, that we always orient ourselves to a world in which we participate using all our senses. This observation is the foundation of phenomena as the things themselves which we encounter with the body. When we see/intuit things in this original way, that which we encounter holds legitimacy for us, it is a formation of truth. In *Formal and Transcendental Logic* 1929, Husserl says: “Thus, the givings of things themselves are the acts producing evident legitimacy or rightness; they are creative primal institutions of rightness, of truth as correctness—precisely because, for the objectivities themselves as existing for us, they are the originally constitutive acts, originally institutive of sense and being” (Husserl, 1999, p.264). The implication is that phenomenological seeing precedes science and is the form of engagement with the world that was originally achieved by human beings. That management is present in our midst does not mean that we cannot enquire into it in the primordial manner of human beings. Imagine if you will, if someone from ancient times was by magic brought into a situation of management, what would she report?

## **2. Phenomenological reduction**

The second step provides an answer to the question: why do we not conventionally see unadulterated, primordial phenomena in the manner Husserl promotes? Because we adopt the habits of thought that are characteristic of our own time and these we inherit from the tradition of western thought that goes back at least 2,000 years. It is usual to blame Socrates, Plato and Aristotle for our orientation because they allegedly inaugurated essential ingredients of it: Socrates we associate with rational thought, argumentation, and reason giving; Plato writes about logic and a world of ideal abstractions that contrasts with our practical world;

and, Aristotle places emphasis on explanations. The challenge is to see management without rational thought, theory, and explanations. Husserl attempts this with his technique of phenomenological reduction, which is also called “bracketing”. Specifically, we must remove from our purview (bracket out) what we find in the world of ideas, the mental world, including the many contradictory accounts of management that can frustrate those who seek to arrange the future. These, Husserl describes as “psychological” (mind-based) ideas about management, as “argumentation” about management. As he says, One’s “delusion vanishes as soon as one abandons general argumentation” and turns to the “things themselves” (Husserl, 1999, p.9). Thus, we are to reject “general argumentation”, the opinions of theorists, practitioners, policy analysts, and social scientists. It is these unsatisfactory, “normative principles” that Husserl says are “grounded” in the “psychology of knowledge”, our ideas. To achieve the phenomenological attitude we must shed our present presuppositions or theories – we must involve ourselves with that which is there in itself with ourselves. The technique of bracketing is easy to describe and difficult to practice. The task is to identify categories of ideas which we hold and abandon them (bracket out) whilst we cling onto what remains. For example, we tend to ask “why” or “what” when we observe something new. When we ask “why” we summons forward reasons or explanations which in themselves entail more presuppositions. When we ask “what” we tend to describe phenomena using the categories of things that are familiar to us, such as physical objects, mathematical concepts, or psychological constructs. There are exercises available to practice seeing only what presents itself and the present author has explored their use with practicing managers.

### **3. Seeing essences**

The third step in Husserl’s procedure is to identify within that which presents itself the essence of the phenomena. Hence, first we involve ourselves with management, second we eliminate all that we typically understand, and then third we seek to identify the essence of that which remains, this to be the essence of management. It is the world of management as that world is given to us in and of itself. In this second tier of elimination – another bracketing out – we reject that which we find contingent, unessential or transitory in the phenomena.

However, such “rejection” is not an active procedure, but rather, passively, the phenomenologist allows essences to show themselves. This process, which produces an intuitive knowledge of essences, is the eidetic reduction. Described positively, it is to allow a vivid image of the hidden intrinsic quiddity to form from engagement with the phenomena. Husserl says of this that a “new kind of ‘inner’ experience opens up the limitless transcendental field of being” (Husserl, 1999, p.331) – we engage with that which is beyond our ordinary natural attitude towards things.

An analogy, which draws upon mathematics and something very familiar, adumbrates the eidetic method. Regardless of the number of triangles you physically encounter, you understand the notion of a triangle as something distinct from all physical renditions of a triangle. Nevertheless, there remains a sense in which the precise triangle *is* of your experience, it is just not of your physical/external experience (see Hartimo, 2010, pp.78-79, for a discussion of this analogy). Once a child achieves this insight about the triangle, it remains forever unshakeable as a truth found within the person. Likewise, the truths (“knowledge” if you are not comfortable with “truth”) about management when they emerge from phenomena which we bodily encounter will be for each of us truths.

Everything is experienced as something. The way of being of the phenomena is the essence of the phenomena. It is more likely to become apparent once we accept that the phenomena are not external to ourselves, and forever cast off the distinction between ourselves and our environment. Typically, it is relationships that are important in phenomenological seeing. Spatial objects are often not what engage us is essences. The dimensions of your desk are not as important as its ability to accommodate your knees and hold the telephone. As Husserl says in *Ideas I*, the spatial being can appear only in certain orientations (Husserl, 1999, p.73). What emerges in phenomenological studies is that relationships are what count. Thus, it is the relationship you hold to your desk that is important, not the desk itself. The relationship involves many separate “factors” all of which are equally important because they are

indispensable to the situation. Heidegger would use the word “equiprimordial” to indicate the unity of the phenomena that is you, your desk and many other things (Heidegger, 1962, p.149). The discerning of essences is the discerning of what is the nature of relationships. When a manager’s work is free-flowing, when she just deals with things, she is engaged with essences. It is a very common situation. Another way to describe it is notice that the manager is unaware of her thinking. You may remember situations when you drove a car but be unable to remember the specific actions you took such as avoiding traffic, or releasing the hand brake. In the things that you do without thought you engage with essences. You, the car, the road and the surrounding situation, are one phenomenon. Husserl’s phenomenological method is a means to enquire into such situations. They are very common in management at all levels. They are quite critical when we find that someone, for no good reason, does the right or the wrong thing. “I do not know why I did it”, they say.

### CONCLUSION

As we move into our unknowable future it is critical how we understand ‘management’ in and of itself. This understanding (the sense we make of perceived management), determines the premises upon which we will base all our research. Phenomenology as a method – the method of Husserl – holds potential for practical managers and theorists alike: because, it enables us to see management in a manner that is distinct from the manner required by positivist science. If this potential is to be realised, work must be done to enable the deployment of the method. There are skills to learn and they can be mastered only through practice in accordance with the inner nature of the discipline of phenomenology. To date, management theorists who indicate sympathy for phenomenology have only raised a hope – they have not engaged with discipline sufficiently. The use of derived theory must be considered with caution. The present paper seeks to nudge them in the right direction and to indicate where in the theory of Husserl and Heidegger we might find guidance if phenomenology is to be seriously advanced in management. It is unlikely that enquires into management can be founded on techniques of phenomenology allegedly found useful

elsewhere. Management practitioners and theorists must do their own thinking with the theorists who profoundly wrestled with the phenomenological method, which is to say, with Husserl and Heidegger initially. This approach is consistent with recent summative academic literature as it relates to the use of the method (for example, Kersten, 1989; Small, 2001).

It should be apparent that the method holds the promise of no particular results. If practitioners or theorists come to the method with the cherished, covert hope that it will improve management they are already defeated. "Improvement" is always improvement upon something grasped in a contemplative manner. The word "improve" implies there is a known goal towards which circumstances may move. Goals in the sense here are always theoretical entities and it is hegemony of theory which phenomenology must overcome.

Phenomenology as method legitimises the manager in her total situation. There is never a way to "general conclusions" from phenomenology; instead each manager must struggle to attain the sense within their own situation. That does not mean that conversations about situations are unhelpful, to the contrary. But ultimately the method will deliver insights that are incontrovertible for the manager and precluded from comprehensive access by others. This is a dramatic move away from the notion of objective, detached observers which we associate with the methods of positivist science – it brings us instead to focus on sense, relationships and experience as a totality. It is a method for those who seek to genuinely address the complexity and dynamics of management as their situation.

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