

Collaboration: is it only a metaphor? - an action perspective on how to make it real

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Abstract. The current complexity of organisational environments is related to the challenges of the knowledge economy and it calls for a drastic and breakthrough development of conceptual frameworks able to inform new and innovative organisational practices. Knowledge management and organisational learning already take this lead though it is necessary to complement them and to use deeper and more complex insights able to grasp present organisational reality. Social philosophy in general and action philosophy in particular represent a powerful contribution to the improvement of organisational developmental potential. The present paper represents an illustration and an introduction to a drastically needed mediation between philosophical contributions and management theory and practice.

1 Introduction

Collaboration and coordination are critical concepts within the current context of organisational change. These concepts have been developed extensively within specific knowledge fields such as Knowledge Management, Organisational Learning, Computer Supported Collaborative Work, Communities of Practice, Organisational Meaning, Organisational Communication, and Organisational Development. However, management and organisational practices rarely profit from these developments thus there is a wide margin for improvement in terms of understanding why theory and practice are so often divorced from each other.

The present paper develops out of a series of six questions which gradually disclose the main message which is being transmitted: that current organisational settings need new theories and practices able to adequately respond to the challenges of the new economy [8]. Within this paper, an action perspective is the ground for the exploration of innovative and breakthrough conceptual frameworks. Action philosophy is used as the background for new approaches to organisational coordination and collaborative practices. The questions which form the road map for this paper are the following: (1) How does collaboration relate to coordination? (2) What makes them important within organisational settings? (3) How may they represent a survival issue within the context of the knowledge economy? (4) What difference does it make, to cooperation and to collaboration, to be computer supported? (5) What is the relation between an activity perspective and a learning

perspective on collaboration and cooperation? (6) What may be the role of action? How may action and its philosophical meaning present breakthrough venues for new theories and practices at management level?

2 Collaboration and coordination

Collaboration and coordination represent two aspects of the same single reality. Collaboration consists of acknowledging the issue of voluntary and intentional participation within a specific activity. Coordination refers to the degree of adjustment and of common referents which different participants share with each other while performing a specific activity. We may say that the face of an analogical watch shows two hands which are coordinated: as the long hand goes around 360 degrees the short hand advances a twelfth part of the circle. This coordination enables us to read the time. The hands of the watch are not only coordinated among themselves but also with the Big Ben's hands, otherwise we would say that the watch's time is not correct. We would also need to take into account the time zone as different geographical fuses are subject to specific time differences in relation to Greenwich time. Within each fuse we must also acknowledge the different seasons time definitions whenever they have been stipulated. Why go into such detail in relation to such a common example? The time example shows how far the routines and procedures which we take for granted in our daily life are the product of a historical development which is socially determined, i.e. social conventions produced by specific communities subject to specific circumstances resulted in specific coordination procedures.

Do we need to recall that 3000 years ago the Egyptians had a calendar and a time scale every time we look at a watch? Certainly not. The crucial issue is that we understand and value the importance of social determinations in relation to every single coordination instance that permeates our daily life. Trains time schedules and train stations, airports, factories, hyper-markets, schools or any institution is bounded by coordination procedures which are socially determined. Organisational routines, norms, rules, bureaucratic procedures, time tables, conventions and protocols, represent coordination instances which keep an organisation together and are the product of the organisation's past and present community. The organisational identity and the organisational memory are inherently and constitutively linked with these coordination aspects. Identity and memory are connected with coordination issues because these are themselves the product of organisational social life, these are social conventions produced by historically situated communities. An organisation is a single whole because these social bounds exist, i.e. an organisation is a social entity and this social life itself determines every single aspect of the organisation's existence even those usually taken for granted as fixed and immutable entities. When we referred to the time example the coordination issue was related to non human objects, the hands of a watch. Different pieces of a machine or an engine may be said to be coordinated among themselves. So the term coordination can be applied to both human and non human situations. Though within organisational settings coordination at human level is far more complex than that of physical objects, these examples still represent didactic metaphors of what coordination means in human terms.

Can we say that the hands of a watch collaborate? We would need a sophisticated theory to support this statement, one that would interpret reality as a continuum in which each entity may have different degrees and capacities to interfere with its surrounding environment. With the term collaboration its most conventional application is to human endeavours. Intentions, motivation and will are characteristics which we usually attach to human beings. Nevertheless, non human situations may represent strong and illuminating metaphors for collaboration. The evolution of species and the way that in catastrophic situations the species which have incorporated more characteristics from different species are the ones that have a best chance of survival, is a critical example of collaboration. Still within a biological setting, at micro level, in relation to micro-organisms, the way that virus and bacteria survive and develop, and how the immune system responds, may also be enlightening examples of collaborative activity. Human collaboration is usually interpreted using psychological and cognitivist approaches. Individual's interests and intentions may explain collaborative behaviour: «In order to reach this objective I have to collaborate in this task». Individuals traits and personality may also be used as justifications for collaboration: «That person has a generous and extrovert nature and so collaboration is straightforward».

Beyond psychological and cognitivist perspectives we may question why and how those interests and intentions, traits and personality, developed and emerged. In order to answer those questions we have to use social philosophy. Collaboration, from this perspective, gains new and revolutionary insights. Though current and conventional management theory rests almost fully on psychology and cognitive science to deal with the human side of organisational life, social philosophy may bring an integrative and transformational approach able to deal with the deeper and more complex levels of management and organisational settings. From a social philosophy perspective collaboration may be interpreted as the result of a specific positive, productive and gratifying, experience which has occurred at community level. This experience may be referred to as a learning process. Communities 'learn' to collaborate by successfully practising collaborative activities, so that collaboration is a learning-by-doing process. We referred above that coordination and collaboration are two aspects of a single reality and that coordination instances are the result of social practices and structures. The single reality we were referring to is organisational social life and this social life affects, influences and determines both coordination and collaboration practices.

The relatively recent management disciplines of organisational learning and of knowledge management take a special interest on organisational environments where knowledge is created and shared, collaborative forms of work and learning are practised, and higher order inquiry processes, such as appreciative inquiry and double-loop learning, are part of a constant and continual reflexive practice. The growing interest in communities of practice is another example of the central role these play within organisational contexts. The British Standard Institute document on knowledge management describes it as: «The creation and subsequent management of an environment which encourages knowledge to be created, shared, learnt, enhanced, organised and utilised for the benefit of the organisation and its customers.» [6]. At practical level, from an initial focus in technology issues, there was a gradual development first to individual centred approaches and later to social related issues. The growth in importance of the theory of communities of practice represents and

illustrates this development process [15]. This development is based on the argument that both organisational learning and knowledge management initiatives are meaningless unless adequately 'situated', i.e. the appropriate contexts have to be taken into account. This means that we must acknowledge, identify, value and nurture the corresponding communities, be communities of practice, of knowledge or of learning. Organisational learning certainly witnesses the novelty in management studies. Within this knowledge field, one key structuring and central element is the concept of double-loop learning developed by Argyris [3], who is one of the founding fathers of organisational learning. This concept, which states the need for constantly questioning our own assumptions, illustrates the jumping over the barriers of many well established and departmentalised areas of knowledge. Victoria Marsick [9] develops the concept of informal learning. Brown and Duguid [5] call attention to the social life of information. Karl Weick [14] studies the process of meaning creation at organisational level. The specific message of this paper is that these management and organisational theories call attention to issues which these theories themselves cannot explain. This means that they need further development and further integration and that this may only be accomplished through the use of mediations.

3 Collaboration within organisational settings

The answer to the question of why coordination and collaboration are so important to organisational life is that coordination and collaboration are the result, the reflection and the product of social practices and structures. And these practices and structures in turn represent the essence of the organisational identity and memory. Organisations are social structures. As social structures, their social practices form a single and organised whole which is itself constitutive of each organisation as such. In other words, organisations exist as long as they are the arena for coordination and collaboration practices. Coordination and collaboration exist *per se* within organisations because that is what an organisation is about. Each organisation constitutes and represents a specific and unique form of organising, designing and promoting, coordination instances and collaborative practices. Given the issue that all organisations inherently and inescapably present coordination and collaboration mechanisms then we may consider the degree, the intensity, the extensity, the inclusiveness, the energy, the dynamism, the creativity and the quality of these mechanisms and processes.

At organisational level, the practices and processes are supported by social relations which may be characterised as social structures. Archer and Bhaskar [2] develop extensively the notion of social structures, posing the question as to how they should be conceptualised. Roy Bhaskar, the father of critical realism theory, argues that without the concept of social structure, or something like it, we cannot make sense of persons. Bhaskar insists that the problem is that we need the idea of a social structure, but that a social structure does not exist in the same way as a magnetic field: «society is *incarnate* in the practices and products of its members. It does not exist apart from the practices of the individuals; it is not witnessable; only its activities and products are.» [2] (*italics in the original*). Structures are both *medium* and *product*, enabling and constraining. Since social structures do not exist independently of activities, they are not simply reproduced but are, as Bhaskar notes, *reproduced* and

transformed. This author explains that it is because society is incarnate in the practices of its members, that it is easy to lapse into methodological individualism, in which society disappears and only individuals exist. Of course, “society has *not* disappeared, since these individuals are *persons* and their acts are *situated*, not simply in a ‘natural’ world but in a world constituted by past and ongoing human activity, a humanised natural and social world.” (ibid, 1998)(italics in the original). The argument of these authors follows that because social structures are incarnate in the practices of persons, this means that they do not exist independently of the conceptions of the persons whose activities constitute (reproduce, transform) them. It is because persons have beliefs, interests, goals, and practical knowledge acquired in their epigenesis as members of a society that they do what they do and thus sustain (and transform) the structures. Bhaskar further elucidates this point: “... all agents have practical knowledge (not necessarily cognitively available) and some degree of understanding of the real nature of social structure which their activities sustain, [however] unintended consequences, unacknowledged conditions, and tacit rules limit the individual’s understanding of his or her social world.”

There is some parallelism between the importance of social structures within the field of social studies and specific approaches set forward by organisational literature. Peter Senge [12] states that: “Organisations change only when people change” and “People change only when they change from within”. To learn, to acquire, to create knowledge, is a social process thus not an individual and isolated task. Personal learning as any personal phenomena is intrinsically and inherently social in essence. The notion of knowledge as values and beliefs is also constitutively socially structured. “Knowledge, unlike information, is about beliefs and commitments” [10]. And also: “The power of Knowledge to organise, select, and judge comes from values and beliefs as much as, and probably more than, from information and logic.” [7]. Organisations cannot be regarded as objective and neutral entities as it is critical to recognise the powerful impact of people’s beliefs and values - people’s thoughts and actions are inescapably linked to their value system, they are integral to knowledge, determining what the knower sees, absorbs, and concludes from her observations. People with different values ‘see’ different things and organise their knowledge according to their values.

In biology, the more sophisticated the species the better chances it has of survival in strainful and stressful situations. Similarly, organisations have a better chance of survival the better they are able to develop their coordination and collaboration mechanisms and practises. The knowledge economy represents a revolutionary potential change which is linked to the information and communication technology development, the globalisation of markets, and the increase in the pace of change and of the level of complexity of organisational environments [8]. These changers require new theories and practices on behalf of organisations so that they may not only survive but also reap the benefits of the new economic reality. The knowledge economy brings forth a new approach to traditional neo-classical economics. Knowledge becomes a new factor of production, new in terms of not being submitted to conventional economical laws. Instead of diminishing its value by being used as any other resource, knowledge, within a knowledge economy, increases its value by being used and shared. Thus the crucial importance of promoting, fostering and facilitating knowledge sharing practices, collaborative forms of working and of learning, and community building, sustaining and intensifying mechanisms.

In order to grasp the complexity of the new economy it is relevant to consider the role of social philosophy. «There is no sharp dividing line between science and philosophy, but philosophical problems tend to have three special features: (i) they tend to concern large frameworks rather than specific questions within a framework; (ii) they are questions for which there are no generally accepted method or solution; (iii) they tend to involve conceptual issues.» [11].

Van der Wal summarises the development of contemporary philosophy and highlights the key elements of this process within the period of the 20th century: «... what have we 'learned' in the field of philosophy? In the case of philosophy, 'learning' is understood as getting a more adequate insight into the frameworks in terms of which we spell our experience, in particular as getting an eye for aspects that were overlooked or insufficiently noticed in the philosophy of earlier periods. In that connection, we have four themes: (1) Subjectivity and inwardness, i.e. the issue of the special mode of being of the subject (e.g. in phenomenology, and in existentialism). (2) Intersubjectivity and connectedness, i.e. the 'discovery' that by the relation between subjects a very special dimension of reality is indicated that cannot be adequately characterised in terms of the subject-object relationship (e.g. dialogical and hermeneutic philosophy). (3) Mediation, the issue that meanings are always context and tradition bound, that subjectivity, mind, etc. manifest themselves only as 'incarnated', mediated by nature (philosophy of language, philosophy of the mind). (4) The evolution from a uniform to a manifold concept of rationality and experience (epistemology, philosophy of science)» [13]. It is critical to highlight the way that learning is understood within the present paper as well as the way it is described by Van der Wall within a philosophical context. Learning is interpreted and presented as an imminently practical action, experientially based, which is open to reality as it manifest itself: «'learning' is understood as getting a more adequate insight into the frameworks in terms of which we spell our experience».

4 Computer supported collaboration

Although coordination and collaboration are intrinsic and inherent characteristics of an organisation, its computational activity is a choice and an option that organisations have as a means to reach its ends. Without computers we could not have taken man to the Moon or a robot to Mars, neither could we run a modern airport or a modern stock exchange. However, aeroplanes and stock exchanges are anterior to modern computers. The point that is important to make is that coordination and collaboration are constitutive elements of organisational life and that computational expertise is gradually becoming a prerequisite for organisations within current complex environments. This complexity is not merely related to the intrinsic complication of, for instance, aerospace technology but rather with the complex whole that today's reality represents. Having a hamburger stand is a straightforward simple business. However, to run a world chain like Mac Donald's would not be possible without the computer and computerised activity. This complexity is connected not just to the production chain of a hamburger but with the intricacies of today's global markets, forms of competition, and power influences. As a simple example it suffices to say that Mac Donald's real business and profitability results more from its global level real estate transactions and business than from its fast food market share.

Nevertheless, it is still crucial to consider coordination and collaboration within an organisation whose activities are computerised. We can have organisations without computers, so that we can have coordination and collaboration without computers, but it still is relevant to consider how these coordination and collaboration may be altered through the use of computers. The coordination capacity of a computerised organisation increases exponentially and this is the most obvious effect and result of using a computer. Computers are information processors and as such they represent a valuable tool for coordination activities. The collaboration side of this equation is less obvious though it is as important or even more so than the impact that computers have in improving the coordination activities. Virtual communities, on-line discussions, chat groups, special interest groups, portals, blogs, webpages, e-mail and the World Wide Web, are examples of computerised social interaction and of personal and collective communication mechanisms. Many factors are relevant within this on-line social interaction. The freedom in terms of time and space is an immediate element. The importance of the visual content is another critical aspect of contemporary communication. The fact that in most circumstances it is necessary to write down personal considerations potentially improves the reflective practice process. More importantly, the fact that these personal registers may be consulted later by the author or by others, and may be commented, contradicted and developed, represents a major factor for the promotion and incentive of collaborative practices.

Computer supported collaboration definitely represents an increase in the potential and collaborative capacity of an organisation. Though initially we have been referring to collaboration and to on-line social interaction, through blogs or virtual communities, at a general level, within an institution, exactly the same mechanisms occur. Both collaboration and computer mediated interaction may be studied and analysed outside of an institutional setting, though within organisations these collaboration processes are particularly relevant as they represent the organisational potential itself, and its survival and developmental capacity. As long as computer supported social interaction increases the potential for collaborative practices and of coordination mechanisms then computer supported activities represent a crucial survival issue for today's organisations. To make it clearer: it is not the simple presence or existence and use of a computer that matters. Technology is critical though it is so as long as it is able to interfere in a definitive and positive way with organisational social life. The relation and the interference between technology and the social aspects of an organisation is always present even when it is not visible immediately and at a superficial level. The question is whether organisational designers, managers and information systems experts and practitioners are able to acknowledge and to explore this hidden potential and whether we have organisational and management theories able to deal with and to grasp the complexity of an organisational social life, in particular when it is being offered the privilege of profiting from the high potential that a computerised organisation may benefit from.

5 The activity and the learning perspective and phenomenology

Every activity has a specific pattern and procedural logic yet it is also open to the immediate circumstances which are present during its occurrence. We may distinguish, artificially, a fixed and rigid part or component of an activity and also a

flexible and changing part. An activity forms an organised whole so this separation is artificial in the sense that it represents a methodological step in our effort to understand what an activity is, and what it means and represents. When focusing on the flexible and changing side of an activity we may also further continue this process. We may artificially separate the changing elements that are related with the surrounding environment and external conditions of an activity, from the influence and agency power which every actor has over the activity which she performs. This separation is still artificial and merely methodologically relevant as it is a means to reach an end, that of better understanding an activity as such. The external and the internal conditions of an actor performing an activity form an organised whole and if we fail to grasp this reality we will be dealing only with a partial view of what an activity is and represents. Following this reasoning, there is a dynamism which characterises an activity and which includes both internal and external changing conditions, yet there is a fixed or structured element in this dynamism as if it were a dynamic pattern.

Learning is often considered as the process of acquisition of competencies and skills. Though this is the most common interpretation and it is psychologically based, it is also possible to consider an alternative perspective coming from a social philosophy background. A phenomenological approach places learning as a life activity, inherent to all living forms. As we are considering organisational settings it is sufficient for us to focus on human learning. Learning, from this perspective, may be regarded as a continuum and permanent process which may be more visible, conscious and intense in some periods of time and in some phases of life though these are only changes of rhythm and of pace of a single thread and unique process. Learning, from this perspective, is not the linear, unidirectional and monolithic accumulation of resources, of whatever kind, but rather a complex, multidimensional and creative process which may only be paralleled with a developmental process. To learn is to live and to learn is to develop, and backward and forward movements, blanks and breakthroughs, are all integrated within a single and unique learning process.

Phenomenology, extensively developed by Husserl (1859-1938), is a branch of philosophy which proposes an interpretation of reality as an opening and integrative movement able to grasp reality as it manifests itself. Instead of focusing on the mental and cognitive abilities of individuals, as independent and autonomous interpreters of reality, phenomenology integrates individuals and reality within a single whole from which it may develop a gradual emerging and rationalisation process. This process represents an alternative perspective of interpreting reality, an alternative to psychology or even to other forms of philosophical analysis. It is possible to consider cognitivist perspectives as a specific phase, or a stage, within a broader and more complex process. The phenomenological approach centres its attention outside of the cognitivist notion of the individual. Instead of having a subject studying an object there is a total reframing of what studying itself means. The static subject perspective becomes a dynamic subject-object together with all the reality in which each individual is immersed. This particular philosophical instance is called being-in-the-world. The phenomenological perspective is particularly interesting when applied to organisational settings. It can lead to powerful insights in terms of how to deal with the tension between that which may be predicted and planned, and that which is being constructed as we go along so that it cannot be captured or framed into a precise and

prescriptive approach. Traditional management has conventionally focused mainly on the predictive and prescriptive side of organisational life. The knowledge economy, with its inevitable increase in complexity and in the pace of change, has forced a gradual shift towards a closer attention to the creative and unpredictable power of new forms of organisation, the ones where collaborative forms of work and of knowledge sharing are the norm. Though psychology and cognitive science have the lion's share of influence within management settings, alternative perspectives such as phenomenology, or hermeneutics and ontology, are gradually gaining new ground. The need for better social philosophy resources in organisational analysis is justified by the increased complexity of both internal and external organisational environments.

Within an organisational context, learning may be said to be part, at least as a potential, of every activity. Both the rigid pattern and the flexible dynamism of an activity have to be learnt, the former in a visible and more formal way and the later through a learning-by-doing and a learning-to-learn informal process. Formal and informal learning are also an artificial distinction and an erroneous terminology as they both represent rationalisation, and as such, formalisation, processes yet each one of a different nature. Coordination and collaboration within organisations, are based on two confronting issues. On one hand, they are based on the critical importance and central role that these activities represent within organisational life and, on the other hand, they are based on the fragility and delicacy of such processes as they are connected and determined by the complexity of organisational social interaction. The better able we are to recognise and acknowledge the way that learning processes permeate organised activity, the better will we be able to design organisations and information systems which are able to promote, to foster and to facilitate collaborative work and coordination practices. The specificity of a phenomenological approach or of other philosophical strand may only be briefly mentioned within the context of a paper yet the central message to retain is that there are, there exist, a myriad of alternative perspectives which may bring new light and new insights into organisational reality. This application is not immediate and straightforward yet it is already a giant's step to merely consider the possibility of other perspectives and points of view. The opportunities and challenges of the new economy definitely call for innovative, open and creative perspectives.

6 The role of action and management theory and practice

Action, philosophical action, is not equivalent to doing something. Action may be compatible to someone being perfectly still, as reflection is a critical component of action. Doing is action only when there is some degree of freedom and of self-determination in that doing process. The Charlie Chaplin's film, «Modern Times», frames doing processes which are not action as the factory worker must endlessly repeat the same movement over and over again. Every time there is a conscious or unconscious, voluntary or involuntary, chosen or imposed decision not to interfere with the course of an activity there will be doing but not action. Action presupposes that there is an interchange, someone that is able to affect something and who also is being affected by that something. Action assumes that agents or actors have agency power, i.e. are able to follow directions which are not necessarily those predetermined

or predicted initially. Once action is in action, no prediction is possible. The anti-predictive nature of action places it as an apparent undesirable guest to organisational settings or to any contexts where prediction is key. Most conventional perspectives on management relate it to forms and strategies which enable prediction, anticipation and planning. Traditional management is synonymous to command and control measures and procedures, with single voice and unidirectional communication channels.

The changes imposed by the knowledge economy, its increase in complexity and in the pace of change seriously compromise traditional management forms. Similarly to the way that the new economy does not wipe out the old economy in a blink of eye lashes, also old forms of management and old leadership styles cannot change and, indeed, should not change overnight. The point that it is critical to make is that it is possible to describe at least two alternatives, one being traditional management and, the other one, new forms of management, characterised by flatter, more horizontal organisations, where communication is multidirectional and where multiple voices can be heard. Instead of a command and control culture there is an open and challenging environment. Instead of roles and responsibilities being clearly assigned there is a greater degree of flexibility and of collective and distributed sharing of activities and of responsibilities.

The best and most common image is that of comparing a classical music orchestra with a jazz orchestra. The former has perfectly assigned roles and everyone knows what is expected of her. All goes well as long as every single player focus on her own performance and on the conductor's directions and ignores everything else. The later form of organisation, the jazz orchestra, is centred on an extreme attention to each other and a focus on the overall result of the group as a whole. Each individual action takes the others into account as well as the collective product. In the first one, the conductor coordinates the orchestra single handily. In the second one the coordination emerges out of each practice and through the practice itself. In the first one, there is a strict partiture to follow, and times may be predicted accurately. In the second one there is only a loose theme or a starting melody from which the whole piece develops. Collaboration in the former one is unidirectional, every musician has to collaborate with the conductor. In the former one, there is no conductor. The conductor's role is performed in a flexible and distributed way, each one taking the lead as it seems fit to do so. Collaboration is then multidirectional and much more intense and sophisticated.

As long as modern forms of organisations may be compared to jazz orchestras then an action perspective will not only be relevant but a must, a sheer necessity and a survival issue. Within an action perspective there is also room for plans and for improving the systematisation processes. It is similar to the situation that most jazz musicians have a sound training in classical music and it is from that solid background that they advance into more creative and improvised activities. Improvisation, creativity and intuition, similarly to what has been mentioned about informal forms of learning, represent specific and special forms of rationality, with their own logic and rationale.

The crucial message is then that today's organisations need to master both the traditional and functionalistic mechanical managerial activities as well as the creative, flexible and innovative new forms of management. An action perspective helps to integrate both activities and functions. By bridging and integrating these often interpreted as irreconcilable areas it opens true windows of opportunity for

organisational development. Innovation, in particular organisational innovation, becomes the immediate result and end product of an action perspective.

To recapitulate, an action perspective takes into account the intentionality of the actor as well as the actor's openness to her surrounding reality. As such, action cannot be perfectly predetermined or predicted. However, it is exactly the reliance on individual's agency power and decision making capacity which is needed within an organisational environment which is extremely complex and volatile. The higher the complexity the greater the need for action oriented actors. The less the predictive power the more important to have self acting individuals. But the action perspective does not end here. Action is not synonymous to independent and isolated individuals, agents or actors. Autonomy and self intentionality are not incompatible with a cohesive collective environment or with an intense social interaction. The jazz orchestra captures these features in perfection: autonomous actors show a great awareness and attention to the group as a whole and act, i.e. improvise, accordingly. There is a distributed social organisation where dialogue and heteroglossia, or multiple voices, to use Bakhtin's terminology [4], are present.

So an action perspective presupposes a specific organisational environment and organisational culture. One that promotes collaboration by designing coordination mechanisms which both satisfy the structural organisational needs and also leave room for creativity and innovation. «Culture is the most important and least understood set of dynamics at work in an organisation, creating the context in which all work is done.» [1]. An action perspective is both a conceptual framework and an organisational practice, which may be implemented and promoted through the further acquaintance with the rich world of social philosophy. This may not be possible directly but there are great gains to be expected from mediation forms which bridge the philosophical and the managerial worlds. This has been the aim of this paper: to open possible exploratory roads for the development of management theory and practices which respond in an adequate and successful manner to the challenges being presented by the knowledge economy.

More than a theory and a practice, an action framework represents a specific way of interpreting reality. When applied to organisational reality it may open new points of view and expand the horizons in a way which would not have been possible otherwise. This to say that it is possible to apply an action perspective to any organisation, as a reading lens, though some organisations may be closer to be able to profit fully from what an action perspective has to offer than others. An action perspective would be best adopted through an organisational learning or a knowledge management tool or instrument as these parallel disciplines represent the newest forms of management development both in theory and in practice. However, these disciplines have often followed the conventional management reliance in psychology and in cognitive science. An action perspective is not directly incompatible with these trends rather it goes further and deeper than them. This potential must be recognised and acknowledge otherwise there cannot be any real gains from the adoption of an action perspective to collaborative work and coordination practices. Making collaboration a real practice and exploiting its full potential through an action perspective is a powerful yet subtle endeavour. The way it becomes visible is through its actual application. Its results are the confidence which each individual gains and which is visible to others, both internally and externally to the organisation, as well as the level of high trust which is developed among the groups and which permeates

every social interaction. This trust and this confidence is the product of a deeper level understanding of organisational phenomena and of organisational reality. For those familiar with action research, a good image is that of using action research not as a research method but rather as a management practice, as a constant and continuing reflexive practice. And this, is a learning-by-doing and a learning-to-learn process.

7 Final words

The purpose of the present paper is to highlight the window of opportunity that social philosophy in general and that philosophy of action in particular has to offer to organisational settings. This contribution is particularly relevant under the current conditions of the knowledge economy of the information age. This paper followed a series of six questions where organisational coordination and collaborative practices have been discussed. The main focus has been on stressing the constitutive nature that both coordination and collaboration represent to what it means to be an organisation, i.e. an organisation is constitutively defined by the coordination and collaboration design, mechanisms, processes and activities that it puts into action. In order to better grasp this reality we need to acknowledge the importance of organisations as social structures. It is through social interaction that organisations become what they are, as organisations exist as social entities.

Within management settings, the disciplines of knowledge management and of organisational learning already focus on the need for novel and innovative organisational forms and stress the importance of creating specific organisational environments. These environments represent specific forms of social interaction, and they promote knowledge creation and sharing, and collaborative work and learning. However, these new disciplines call attention to issues which they themselves cannot explain. This is the argument in favour of the need for the use of broader, deeper and more complex social philosophy approaches. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate and to prove that it is possible, meaningful and desirable to constitute mediations between philosophical areas and management theory and practices. Once these mediations are present and in action then new and breakthrough organisational practices may emerge. This emergence process may itself be referred to as the development and coming into existence of the knowledge economy and of the learning society.

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