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Title of the manuscript

Thinking about the role of philosophy in project management

Abstract

Is there a role for philosophy in project management? And, if yes, why is this the case and what are the risks of engaging with philosophy? These are the questions that we seek to address in this paper so that we can create the space where the study and understanding of projects under different philosophies can help create excellence in practice.

Key words:

Philosophy, project management, scientific thinking, excellence, practice

Thinking about the role of philosophy in project management

In thinking about the role of philosophy in project management, the first question that we need to be asking ourselves is ‘why should we be interested in philosophy?’ and ‘why should we be interested in philosophy in project management?’. What is it that philosophy has to offer to us as professionals in a broader sense and what is it that philosophy has to offer to us as project management professionals and academics? These are fundamental questions that need to be answered with capable and adequate responses, otherwise our endeavors in this field can be considered futile. The answers to the above questions are not straightforward. Academic thought and professional practices have been supported by many fields, including and not limited to sociology, management science, organization studies, anthropology, engineering and, more broadly speaking – the arts and humanities (of which philosophy is part of), and the natural and social sciences. Is an advanced focus on philosophy needed, required or desired? We believe that it is for the following reasons.

We need philosophy because... the world is changing

Our world and the world of projects is changing in - perhaps what can be termed - an unprecedented rate. The aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, the refugee crisis, the slowdown of China’s growth, the increase in terrorist threats and cyber crime, the ongoing commercialization of education, the continuously changing power balance between nations, governments, citizens, religions and professions, the weakening and strengthening of political and economic unions, such as the European Union, the persisting levels of poverty in wide areas across the world, the ongoing technological advancements can perhaps be considered as miniscule issues in the face of climate change. These are issues that are interdisciplinary, in many cases time-critical and reflect the context in which all projects will be needed to be inspired, designed, executed and delivered.

But, most importantly, these are issues that seem to be driven by different, yet persisting forms of inequality – social inequalities, political inequalities, economic, technological inequalities. For example, executives are better paid than workers and professionals, foreigners are better received in some places of the world than others, information asymmetry is a fundamental characteristic of financial markets and projects. The finite resources of our planet, our systems/technologies and ourselves in devising economic and political systems that can allow us to live and prosper fuel manifestations of inequality and establish different types of *privileges* – some that we would consider legitimate, and others that we see as the source of pain and inequality (Abbot, 1988). People who live in resource-rich countries of the world are privileged with natural resources that often become the source of political, economic and social privileges when combined with strong politics. Based on their advanced command of

an area of practice, extensive socialization in the profession and membership in a professional community, professionals legitimize their claims over areas of expertise, and are required to be accountable for privileges such as their expertise, higher pay and social status. So how can we address inequality and privilege? In answering these questions, we turn to and debate different philosophies, different ways of doing things, arguing for priorities, and means and goals of actions. For example, Rosanvallon (2016) writes:

Equality based on singularity requires a type of society grounded in neither abstract universalism nor identity-based communitarianism but rather the dynamic construction and recognition of specificities. Singularity is not a sign of withdrawal from society (individualism as retreat or separation). Rather, it signals an expectation of reciprocity, of mutual recognition. This marks the advent of a fully democratic age: the basis of society lies not in nature but solely in a shared philosophy of equality. Democracy as a type of political regime is mirrored by democracy as a form of society.

Philosophies underlie our thinking, our social and personal existence, our innovation and ultimately the solutions and the actions that we undertake to address the challenges that we are facing collectively and individually.

The world of projects is equally changing. Most obvious is the trend towards agility, which blurs the long established demarcations between operations and projects by questioning existing roles (such as those of project managers) and project management methodologies. The trend towards Agile/Scrum shows a change in the underlying philosophy of project management. The traditional ontology of a one time, unique undertaking is replaced, at least in some projects, by a process philosophy that uses repetitive daily mechanism in which, for example people, not plans, are the media for communication, and change is embraced instead of avoided. This change in the inward looking view of managing projects is complemented by an outward looking view that puts projects in their larger context. A key concept to mention here is project governance. Biesenthal and Wilden (2014) remind us that the number of publications on this subject has virtually exploded since 2005. This is underpinned by another change in philosophy, where projects are no longer perceived as standalone entities to deliver standalone products or services, but are parts of a larger whole or system, in which they fulfill a clearly defined role, using clearly defined interfaces to their environment in form of governance structures and mechanisms. In other words, the macroscopic global changes are also reflected in the microscopic world of project management, and each of these levels requires underlying philosophies so that the humans living within them can make sense of their world and their roles and tasks therein.

We need philosophy because... we don't know

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832) writes:

Nature, the world, has kept so much freedom for itself, so that we cannot – even through knowledge and science – come close to understanding what it is or place it in an uncomfortable position.

Goethe personifies the world and nature - almost as if it were a real human being that can stand in front of us and we could talk to – and claims that they - he or she - is keeping meaning, reason, experience and emotions away from us. For Goethe, the world is a cryptic entity, a reserved individual that remains silent and fundamentally unknown to us. Goethe alludes to that which is not known and cannot be known, to the ideas, meanings, mathematical equations, laws of physics, concepts, feelings, abstractions and paradigms that we have yet to discover *and* to that ‘which is not, but exists’ and we cannot discover. For Goethe, and much earlier for Parmenides, the world consists of truths that can be discovered, understood (through science) and be learnt, but also of that ‘which is not’ and cannot be examined via reason and experience – the illusion. To the question, ‘what is?’ (i.e. what is the world, what is a human being, what is a rose, what is a book?), Parmenides answers ‘everything is’, that ‘which is’ and ‘which is not’, and alludes to ‘the unity of antitheses’ as a core fundamental mechanism that holds that ‘which is’ and ‘which is not’ together. Similarly, in writing about the space that the poet or author needs to create literary art, Blanchot talks about ‘the reader that is yet to come’. Obviously Blanchot is not talking about a reader that is out there as a market segment that is in existence and can be studied and analyzed for its key consumer characteristics. He is talking about the unknown reader, the reader who will inspire the ‘genesis of the work’. He too, personifies the unknown and alludes to the existence of that which is unknown and will remain unknown, and which by remaining unknown, serves as inspiration, is an eternal source of imagination and creation.

So, if our sciences and scientific methods can help us understand and explain truths, what can we do about that ‘which is not’? What can we do, how can we exist and live with that ‘which is not’? Where scientific method does not apply? One answer is religion. That which cannot be explained and grasped has been addressed by humanity by the creation of religions, the creation of gods and other deities. In a more fundamental reading and understanding of the world, it is philosophies – different ways of existing with the unknown – that prevail. Philosophies underlie our fears and the extraordinary potential of human beings to be inspired and create images and impressions of the unknown while it persistently, stubbornly remains as such. Our philosophies help us dress up the unknown in ways that we can feel comfortable with it, while it remains as such.

There is so much ‘which is not’ in projects. Flyvbjerg (2011) reminds us that the long standing notion that project success can be secured through processes, tools and techniques is too narrow a philosophy. By looking at megaprojects he raised the

understanding that not only optimism bias, but also strategic misrepresentation are main factors (or ‘which is not’ elements) that need to be considered in projects. Thus, the need to adjust the ontology of projects being tasks and processes that we know, can predict, and just need to apply correctly, by also positioning projects as phenomena at the crossroads of sociology and humanity to make sense of them. Examples include the countless aid and support projects started and executed by the people in the European Union for the refugees who had to leave their war shattered countries. These are hardly understandable by using economic philosophies and traditional “business case” perspectives.

Multiplicity of philosophies is required for sensemaking of and in these projects. We see traces of this multiplicity of new philosophical perspectives, for example, in

- Gauthier and Ika's (2012), ontological framework to transcend the abstract epistemological and methodological debates and create a wider view and broader understanding of projects;
- Morris’ ‘Management of Projects’ tradition (Morris, 2013) which firmly establishes the ethos of the project as one that needs to be primarily concerned with building value for the sponsor and attended to in the front-end and throughout the life of the project;
- The ‘rethinking project management’ movement (e.g. Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, & Hodgson, 2006) which attempts to understand projects by shifting the focus to the actuality of project-based working. Thus, a different philosophical stance, grounded in subjective human experience rather than objective planning and control;
- The ‘projects–as–practice’ movement (e.g. by Blomquist, Hällgren, Nilsson, & Söderholm, 2010), who try to understand projects from the practices applied in managing them. Yet another philosophical stance, which centers around the way project management work is executed;
- Borrowing philosophies from neighborhood sciences, such as transcending the ‘genotyping – phenotyping’ concept from the natural sciences to the world of projects. This philosophical stance assumes that projects (just as flowers) may have the same genetic setup (genotyping) at start, but develop very differently over the course of their lifetime (phenotyping), because of exogenous and endogenous influences (Joslin & Müller, 2013).

Coming back to the above quote from Goethe we can say that these approaches help us “*through knowledge and science – [to] come close to understanding what it is*” this thing called project, but we can not put it in an uncomfortable position, as it is on us to understand projects, not vice versa.

We need philosophy because... some of us are driven towards growth, not followership

For Kogler (2012) the beginning of selfhood is intent. Being human requires intention, or what is commonly known as a purpose in life, a sense of direction that has been consciously selected by the individual themselves and has not been imposed. For the sociologists, human beings and, more interestingly here, professionals will find their purpose and define their intentions via a process of socialization, where the individual chooses to affiliate or disassociate themselves with professional, organizational, one's own and higher order values. In this process of socialization, the individual will engage, 'test' different sets of values, reflect and will ultimately create their own, unique (professional) identity which reflects an amalgam of different values which are brought together and ultimately reflect who they are and how they go about living life and practicing their work, i.e. their philosophy (Konstantinou, 2008). In other words, our philosophy (i.e. the guiding principles and values that we choose to follow via a process of socialization with the world and our work) is a fundamental constitutive part of our selves in life and at work.

Some professionals will not realize that they can have an active role in defining their professional philosophy and thus improve their profession and practice. Indeed a recent study showed that top project professionals rarely think about ethics when asked to talk about professionalism in project management (Konstantinou, 2015). They will - somewhat uncritically – adopt, even obey, the professional values of the profession. In this case the profession and the practice is – in the best case - sustained, reproduced and preserved throughout time as the professional 'votes for' and supports the existing status quo – the existing philosophy.

However, for those who do realize that they have and can play an active role in defining their professional philosophy, there is a point in one's professional career where one becomes interested in a debate about different philosophies (i.e. different ways of living life and practicing). Similarly, those professionals who are interested in developing the profession and - far more importantly – the practice will feel the need to be engaged in a debate about different philosophies with the aim of a better practice, growth, development – or, if nothing else, a professional life that holds some excitement. The biggest challenge here is that there is a notable lack of inspiration and debate about different philosophies for these practitioners to turn to. Earlier on in this paper we have given some hints on approaches to overcome these limitations.

We need philosophy because... it is the antecedent for theory development

Academics in project management have criticized the theoretical base of project management as being too narrow or insufficient. While this critique in itself is debatable, it opens the path for a bigger question: Which philosophies should underlie these theories? Any theory is contingent on a philosophy, an antecedent stance, from which a theory is developed. Weick's statement that a theory should only be

interpreted within the ontological and epistemological framework within which it was developed indicates that. Examples include agency theory and its underlying philosophy of economics. Attempts to develop theories of project management, such as those by Turner (2006), are often based on economic and process ontologies/philosophies. A much wider field of possible theories could be derived from a broader ontological/philosophical base, including sociological and humanities ontologies. To that end we must first ask, what is the philosophical base of project management, before we can develop a theory about it. The likely result is a kaleidoscope of different theories, based on a kaleidoscope of different philosophies. A first glance is given through the different schools of project management, such as those by Söderlund (2011) or Turner, Huemann, Anbari, and Bredillet (2010), where each school builds on a different philosophy. The scope of these theory frameworks is so far limited to management and organizational perspectives, which bears a potential to develop project management theory from very different perspectives.

The academic world – which could be seen as a promising destination for philosophical alternatives and debate - has been dominated for decades now by a rather unbearable over-reliance on evidence-based, ‘scientific’ research that significantly compromises our ability to envision and debate different philosophical positions about practice. On this, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) remind us of the ‘heightening danger that in future skill and expertise will be lost through over-reliance on calculative rationality’ (p.790). Academics, and by implication practitioners and the practice, are restricted by the pace of innovation in practice. Academics have to wait for the practitioner community (or in the best case devise action learning projects and join the practitioners in their efforts) to produce new approaches to practice that will translate in academic, scientifically compiled evidence bases. The role of the academic is restricted within the framework/the space of the data from existing practice, and this is partly due to the intellectual comfort that is attached to evidence.

Because we are afraid of speculative ideas, we do, and do over and over again, an immense amount of dead, specialized work in the region of ‘facts’. We forget that facts are only data; that is, are only fragmentary, incomplete meanings, and unless they are rounded out in complete ideas - a work which can only be done by hypotheses, by a free imagination of intellectual possibilities - they are as helpless as are all maimed things and as repellent as are needlessly thwarted ones. (Dewey, 1927)

Our research mindset, methods and our professional standing necessitate and depend on the collection of strong datasets from the realities of *existing* practice. Transcending this mindset into the natural sciences, Higgs, Englert and Brout would have never predicted the Higgs boson (first time measured 50 years after its prediction), just as Einstein could have never predicted gravitational waves (measured first time 100 years after Einstein’s prediction). Arguably, using existing practice as a point of departure can be a source of new philosophies and approaches to work. However, we wouldn’t be able to quote many examples here. The practitioner can

turn to the academic for expertise in a variety of tools, techniques, methods and methodologies and insights to existing practice. But where can the practitioner (including the academic practitioner) turn to for a well-informed, well-thought out, intelligent and dynamic discussion about how (s)he can change their profession for the better? Where can we find out about different views on how we can marry competitiveness and ethics; how we can handle ethics when business schools have been heavily criticized for their lack of attention to business ethics; how we can bridge inequalities; how we can handle climate change; etc.? Where can we find out about transformative views and inform our professional philosophies in ways that supersede existing thinking and can lead respective industries into the future? We have been criticized for our lack of attention on these matters (Morsing and Rovira, 2011), and the examples are abundant. For instance, on May 2015, Schumpeter blog in the Economist urged practitioners to adopt ‘a palette of plans’ and ‘smudging the canvas’ on the premise that ‘choosing a strategy is a lot more complex for companies than it used to be’ (p. 66). Underlying this piece and Schumpeter’s thought is that existing approaches (philosophies) to strategic development are no longer relevant. According to the author the only alternative seems to be a combination or ‘smudging’ of the existing strategic approaches. Is this really the best that we can offer to practitioners?

So, the news is out! Faced with a world that is changing, that can only be partly known to us, and with a distinctive lack of alternative approaches and philosophies to existing practice, it is now the time to perhaps turn to the field of philosophy for inspiration. In this attempt, our allies will be:

- Our datasets and evidence-bases which can be interpreted anew from different philosophical perspectives,
- Our existing insights from practice which can inform our future searches and help us avoid re-inventing the wheel,
- Our existing good practices and academic thinking/insights that have helped us this far (and may prove to be invaluable), but do need to stand our scrutiny anew. Critically evaluating our existing ideas for their strengths and limitations will help us decide and prioritize the areas that need to capture or attention in the short- and long-term future.
- Our existing theories, which helped us to understand the world to the level we do today
- Our curiosity, which helps us to combine, broaden and deepen the above, but also look at the missing links between them, such as the Higgs boson in the natural science

In other words, we may need new perspectives/approaches/philosophies but not at the cost of severing our relationship with the past and our development to date. As Dewey (1927) writes:

Philosophy sustains the closest connection with the history of culture, with the succession of changes in civilization. It is fed by the streams of tradition, traced at

critical moments to their sources in order that the current may receive a new direction. [...] [Philosophy] is itself a change; [...] The intellectual registrations which constitute a philosophy are generative because they are selecting and eliminating exaggerations. [...] [philosophy] is additive and transforming in its role in the history of civilization (p.5).

Dewey seeks to explain the relationship between new ideas/philosophies/change and the past. He sees them as interlinked, with the clear objective of philosophy to eliminate that which is excessive and unnecessary – unnecessary ideas that grow on our thinking like mosses and lichens on rocks by the ocean. The role of philosophy is to clear our thoughts of excess and therefore provide clarity in terms of future directions and orientations. In this way, philosophy is by nature transformative and progressive, forward-looking.

The role of philosophy

Philosophy has a very clear role to play in practice. This is to offer and propose *a range of ideals that can be developed into entire philosophies that can guide and inform practice*. Different ideals will produce different philosophies, which will apply in some cases but not in others. Swift (2008) argues that ideals and, by implication, the philosophies that they generate will entail intellectual and conceptual merits and limitations that – when known to the practitioner can help them critically discuss, compare, evaluate - sensibly judge – their approach to practice. He writes:

As long as philosophers can tell us why the ideal would be ideal, and not simply that it is, much of what they actually do when they do “ideal theory” is likely to help with the evaluation of options within the feasible set (p.365).

Swift makes strong claims about the need for ‘fundamental, context-independent, normative’ philosophies and approaches on the basis that the challenges that we are facing reflect non-ideal circumstances; very much like the challenges that project managers face. As we mentioned above these are complex, interdisciplinary and, in many cases, time-critical issues that require a sophisticated understanding of an issue and ways of addressing an issue that are underlined by different philosophical orientations and approaches. The latter will, by definition, entail conceptual and intellectual strengths and limitations, and will ultimately lead to very different outcomes in practice. An aggressive philosophy and approach to climate change would solve some problems and create others, and so would a fair/just philosophy/approach, an inclusive philosophy/approach, and so on and so forth. Some philosophies/approaches will reflect favorable and relevant solutions in some cases and irrelevant and impractical solutions in other cases. But without an understanding of different philosophical orientations – what is possible – and why, we remain fundamentally limited in our capacity to evaluate our options, we can only be guided by past experiences that may no longer apply and may not represent adequate

solutions to problems, or – even worse – we may be left with luck and the hope that we may get it right. Surely the relevance, applicability and feasibility of different philosophical approaches will play a significant role in the process of critically evaluating new philosophical approaches for their merits and limitations in practice. But the fact that a philosophical approach may not be relevant or applicable in a particular case/problem, is not an adequate reason why we should not evaluate different options about how to go about practice – how to practice. Philosophy can create and help us envision options, alternatives, propositions, suggestions that can inspire groundbreaking or incremental, new conceptualizations of practice. Options, alternatives, propositions, suggestions that can help redefine or reposition what practice is and can be. Philosophy can produce a variety of options and alternatives that can help us grow and develop the practice through a process of critical evaluation. It can distract us from the existing status quo, shake our core and create alternatives, space for debate and evaluation, construct different targets that once imagined and conceptualized can start to become feasible, practical and relevant in some, if not many, cases.

If we pay attention to creating different options and alternatives to approaching practice, we might have a better chance at sensibly evaluating what to do, how to proceed, what are our options. We might have a better chance at drawing new directions for practice, a new state of affairs, a better, fairer, more equitable, more inclusive, more relevant state of affairs that can be prioritized and help us renew the way we think about practice and the inequalities that create our challenges. We can start an intelligent, well thought-out, considered and informed process of exploration, of risk-taking, growth, new thinking and new orientation – a process of creating a reality that now does not exist but can be and is perhaps waiting to be imagined and created. A new philosophy altogether that is tailored to the challenges that we are facing, allows us to explore different ways of interpreting the unknown part of the world, and allow the personal development that a professional is in need of – a consciousness about our choices that will require us to become accountable and inseparable from our practice. Putting the thought more combatively, if philosophers can outline our options and the reasons why they can be important for our practice, the practitioner will be obliged to take full responsibility for their actions. For the professional, this increased accountability over the choice of practice reflects a need, since accountability is a fundamental characteristic of being a professional.

An expert's role also determines the scope of accountability for the expert's work. Professionals account for the complete professional task, including treatment. We can say that experts represent not only units of expertise (as human capital) but also units of accountability for the application of expertise in accordance to their expert role (Mieg, 2009: 753).

For those who feel comfortable with reproducing practices, who do not seek to understand their options, critically evaluate them and claim the accountability of their

choice of practice, an emphasis and discussion of fundamental, context-independent, normative philosophies/approaches would indeed seem threatening. This is fair enough, yet does not constitute a professional profile. For the latter, a philosophical debate and enquiry with the aim of critically evaluating different philosophical approaches to practice, is not relevant.

What are the risks of engaging with philosophy?

Firstly, different philosophies and more generally philosophy as a discipline is frequently criticized for its normative nature. The very notion of a philosophy is seen as elitist, relevant to conservative thinking and moralistic views, which seek to dominate over other views and claim universality. Our message here is the exact opposite. We suggest that the role of philosophy is to create a space where different philosophical orientations/approaches can be critically evaluated. The role of philosophy is to create alternatives and new ideas whilst the professional remains firmly responsible and accountable for the choice of the philosophical approach/orientation that (s)he will chose to apply in practice. We suggest that the value of philosophy in practice does not lie with creating and adopting one, single, unitary, universal philosophy, but with creating and exploring different philosophical orientations to practice. As a process this can enhance our thinking, train our instincts, educate our intentions, help us envision different goals for our practice and ultimately become another resource/a tool that we can use to address the challenges that we are facing, the unknown and our need to immerse ourselves in our practice and serve it as professionals.

Secondly, in the same way that some disciplines can be criticized for their lack of attention to philosophy – such as management science and in many cases organization studies, philosophy as a discipline is frequently criticized (and arguably so) for its lack of attention to facts. Dewey (1927) writes:

But in all of them there is an exuberance and fertility of meanings and values in comparison with which correctness of telling is a secondary affair, while in the function termed science accuracy of telling is the chief matter (p. 7).

Dewey provides a great answer to this problem. He sees scientific thinking and method as a means of testing different ideals and the philosophies they generate, and is clear about those philosophies which do not pass the test: they should be eliminated.

This confers upon scientific knowledge an incalculably important office in philosophy. But the criterion is negative; the exclusion of the inconsistent is far from being identical with a positive test which demands that only what has been scientifically verifiable provide the entire content of philosophy. It is the difference between an imagination that acknowledges its responsibility to meet the logical demands of

ascertained facts, and a complete abdication of all imagination in behalf of a prosy literalism (p.7).

And here Dewey agrees with Swift who similarly suggests that the distinction between philosophy and science is ill-conceived; one that has been unduly established. Our world-philosophers Plato, Aristotle and, even before them, Parmenides were all mystics and scientists at the same time, searching for meaning amongst reason, experience and illusion for Parmenides, structure and phantasia for Aristotle, and the intricate relationship between philosophy and action in Plato's Republic.

Finally, our discussion on the role of philosophy cannot end without acknowledging the political significance of philosophy and, by implication, our suggestions. A focus on inequality is one way of explaining and interpreting the challenges that we face, and as such is a political statement. We have prioritized issues of social, humanitarian and economic concern in our opening paragraphs – this has political bearings. We have put forward a view of the world being partially known to us – and this too has political implications and gravitas. We have reinstated an extended role for the professional, one that needs to include a healthy preoccupation with philosophy – again, a view that could be seen through a political lens. These are choices with significant implications. They suggest that we need to focus on a particular aspect (e.g. inequality) and direct our limited resources (time, knowledge, human potential, funds, etc.) to the address this aspect of reality – i.e. say inequality rather than profit maximization or communitarianism. A philosophy that targets inequality would enable and disable other competing philosophies and – if established – would give raise and power to practices that seek to address inequalities and the relevant communities.

And indeed, philosophy is a political issue; it creates alternatives, and is intrinsically and by definition, transformative. It is fundamentally political in that it creates impactful action and change; it prioritizes and sets aside; it gives and takes power. We suggest that by creating a discussion about philosophy in project management we may perhaps have the opportunity to render different philosophical orientations on project management more visible and therefore more manageable and open to scrutiny by peers and others before we proceed with enacting them in practice. Then we will perhaps have a better chance to be more poignant in our choices and more effective in our practice. We hope we have offered a first step in this direction for the benefit of the communities that are involved (academics, practitioners and policymakers) but - far more importantly - for the practice of project management.

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